

# MORE TROUBLE

DOUGLAS RUSHKOFF: 'THEY ARE COLONISING THE HUMAN MIND'

NATHALIE OLAH'S PROBLEM WITH TASTEFULNESS

PLUS: AVRAM  
FINKELSTEIN,  
SPIRAL TRIBE,  
EKENE IJEOMA,  
NECKBEARD  
DEATHCAMP,  
STEVE SCHAPIRO

SEX MILITANT  
SEX AND SPECTACLE ON THE STREETS

PENNY SLINGER AND THE DIVINE FEMININE



Sex Militant in front of the New York Supreme Court in lower Manhattan, April 2019. Photographed by Alex Austin









From left: Richard Metzger, Paul Laffoley, Grant Morrison and Douglas Rushkoff at the Disinfo Omega Retreat in 2004. Photograph by author

“The videos that Beavis and Butthead watch end up having the opposite effect of what’s intended. When Beavis and Butthead comment on two breasts in a rock video, all of a sudden the breasts are now no longer the object of hypnosis but they’re what calls attention to the hypnotic spell of the filmmaker or advertiser. It reverses the intention – it’s like a very advanced form of heckling, but it brings things into consciousness.

“I was always interested in those kinds of reframings. McLuhan talked about the same thing, how in a new media age the prior medium becomes the content of the next one. Now television is the content of the internet.

“When I was growing up, I was interested in theatre and medicine. Shaw was a doctor. Chekhov was a doctor. Surgeons work in ‘operating theatres’. To me, the commonality between them is looking at what animates life. Are we some biological survival need that creates consciousness and awareness in order to perpetuate it? Or is it awareness that creates biological entities in order to have something to inhabit? And we just really don’t quite know.”

Rushkoff’s words remind me of an interview I did with Paul Laffoley, who was complaining about string theorists adding more and more dimensions into their theories (we’re at 10 or 11 now). And Laffoley was like: “They’re adding these new dimensions like filing drawers but they’re not thinking about what it’s like to be alive in there.” I tell Rushkoff how that always spiked me. What is the thing that lives and breathes within this space? What’s the experience like inside the drawer?

“And that’s my problem with most movies, TV and novels now,” Rushkoff says. “They’re adding layers of complexity – now we’ll tell the story backwards in time, or on three different time loops – but it’s just postmodern pyrotechnics more than a real exploration of what’s the actual lived experience.”

Which is the essence of storytelling, I suppose. “You would think, yeah. There’s something much simpler that we’re not reckoning with and that’s why ‘Team Human’, in some ways, is pathetically naïve or simplistic.”

Last summer, in the upstairs bar of a pub round the back of King’s Cross railway station in London, I pressed a folded-up copy of the second issue of Good Trouble into Rushkoff’s hands. As he opened out the broadsheet, his eyes were wide and smiling through the hubbub of drinking, chatter and music that filled the room. A talk earlier that evening at the British Library, moderated by the *Guardian* columnist George Monbiot, was my first encounter with the ideas of *Team Human*, even though Rushkoff had been doing his podcast for several years. It began after he took a short break from writing after landing the role of professor of media theory and digital economics at Queens College, City University of New York, in 2014, serving as a ‘listening tour’ through which he could see what other people were talking about and use his platform to give them voice. The ideas for the book, informed by the podcast interviews, evolved out of his own monologues on the show, “a distillation of that year of public thinking”.

As we chatted in that bar, half-shouting through the din in the bar’s half-light, a wariness brought on by the nationalistic anti-immigrant rhetorics of Brexit made me ask: who gets to define who gets on the team, who gets to define the ‘human’? Within the book, there’s not really a definition of what being human means per se. Rushkoff talks of it in a very natural, almost naïve way. The closest he gets to a defining quality is that through our language we’re able to bind time, literally replaying and reliving past events through storytelling, and thus pass knowledge between generations. There’s a radical openness suggested by this lack of definition, that being human is whatever you want it to be, and that that’s the point.

“I think the jury’s still out on what humans are, you know?” he says. “And I think that’s okay. The only ones who really want me to define what being human is are the artificial intelligence people. And if I can’t give them a metric for what humanity is, then humanity doesn’t deserve a place in their future.

“It’s almost like the part that we can’t articulate is the part that’s the most important. The closest I can say to it is: the formal cause of human beings is the soul. And that’s the part that’s just so confounding to capitalism and to science. But soul is not some supernatural thing, you know? You could argue it’s the same thing that AI Green or Otis Redding have. What is that? It’s the thing that goes away when you auto-tune their voices.”

In the book, Rushkoff points out that resistance is a metaphor from a bygone age, whether of the political, activist or *Star Wars* variety. In a digital media environment, there is no resistance at attenuation. Binary logic reduces everything to either one or other,

on or off. There is no resistance, only opposition. Musical compression algorithms aren’t designed to represent music accurately, but to fool us into believing that we are hearing it accurately. The rich sonorous ripples of acoustic waveforms are clipped. Performers’ voices are auto-tuned and quantised to a metronomic ‘perfect’ beat. All human quirks and character, everything that’s on a spectrum, comes across as an imperfection in a digital world that reduces everything to a datscape of ones or zeros. The grey areas in between disappear.

“Humanity is the noise,” Rushkoff says. “It might not even be the signal – we’re the noise.” And if we’re optimising ourselves for the technology and not the other way around, are all human traits not favoured by the market (racial diversity, gender fluidity, sexual orientations or proclivities, body types or religious predilections) potentially in danger of being deselected, abandoned or overwritten?

“That’s the thing. The disease is this stark intentionality and this ability to optimise everything really for control and safety and lack of challenge. And humanity is something else! It’s this messy, boundary condition. It’s one expression of nature, one way of manifesting evolution’s social urge.

“Even with Extinction Rebellion, there’s a certain element of play. They want it to be fun, a way of eliciting love and sex and these vital human energies. I do think we’re more human when we’re at play, and that that of rapport is a playfulness.”

What emerges through *Team Human* is not a revolutionary message of overturning the tables and violently taking to the streets. What Rushkoff suggests in terms of action is almost prosaic: being visible, engaging in protests, participating politically and developing new platforms, engaging purposely with the natural world, reforming corrupt institutions and building better ones. The core message seems to be that we just need to participate more.

“It’s not an activist blueprint,” he admits. “It’s a call for something more fundamental than that. I would think activism, direct activism, social change and social justice work would be an obvious next step. But I’m asking that people retrieve these essential human values, and that then necessitates

a whole lot of action. In some sense, it’s a pre-activist message. But if you don’t value humanity, if you don’t value yourself and these connections with others, then I don’t know if that will ever get there.”

As he points out, technology itself doesn’t inherently want anything. Whatever drive or purpose it has comes entirely from the software that we program it with, from the underlying logical value systems that we design and utilise it within. The real target of *Team Human* is this underlying value system: capitalism. Extractive and exploitative capitalism. The book is an attempt to shift our perspective, invert figure and ground, to help us shift our values away from capitalist value extraction, from a winner-takes-all to an all-take-the-winnings kind of logic.

“I’m arguing for pre-distributing the means of production,” Rushkoff says. “What does it mean for the workers to own and for us to own the world? A few corporations beginning in the days of the British East India Trading Company have been gobbling up more and more of our reality. And this process has been naturalised. Now that we’re facing water crises, they’re buying up the water. Human beings have become just another medium for corporate extraction. Our whole race, our whole planet, our whole everything has been surrendered to a very short-sighted economic model that was developed to slow the rise of the middle class in the 11th century. If we are going to keep that model, if we want to believe in that model more than ourselves, then we’re about to pay the price.

“I try to make a distinction between revolution and renaissance. A revolution is a turn of the cycle. A renaissance is the retrieval of old ideas in a new context. I trace a lot of our current problems back to the last renaissance. For all the cool things about it, it was also the retrieval of very specific ideas from ancient Rome and Greece about centrality and control and the repression and obsolescence of women, magic, indigenous people, spirit and peer-to-peer economics. All the things that were forcibly suppressed during that time really need to be retrieved now, or we all die.

“But in terms of the reception of the ideas, I feel like the time is right. People really do want to join Team Human. They want to entertain the possibility of humanity making it another century or two. They have just enough hope that thinking that our children might live out their natural lives is a daring belief to entertain.”

The final dose of *Team Human*’s cultural medicine is an exhortation to ‘Find the others’.

“I’m lucky because I was old enough to meet most of my ‘others’: Timothy Leary and Robert Anton Wilson and Terence McKenna, [*Mondo 2000*]’s RU Sirius,” explains Rushkoff. “They were my first ‘others’ and there were others at college. But honestly, for a long time the tell-tale marker for finding a fellow traveller was, did they have psychedelic experience? And I’m not saying that psychedelic experience is required to understand the world... it’s just that in 80s, Republican, Reagan America, if you were one of the 12 people at Princeton who took acid in 1980, it meant a whole lot of other things about you at the time. It meant that you listened to Brian Eno. That you were already exploring these ‘figure-ground’ relationships between humans and society. It meant that you had read William Burroughs and thought about the deconstruction of media and cut-and-paste. These people had been turned on to the system’s iterative reality and the whole notion that we are participating actively in the creation of reality.

“But then, more recently, as I started writing *Team Human*, the notion of ‘the others’ expanded from the others who have had the great psychedelic experience to the true others, the kids with the Make America Great Again hats... These are human beings, and I keep arguing that we’ve got to see them as humans if we want them to see Mexican immigrants as humans.”

The destruction wrought by European colonialists led Native Americans to conclude that the invaders must have a disease: *wetiko*, a delusional belief born from people’s inability to see themselves as enmeshed and interdependent parts of their natural environment. This disconnect leads them to see nature as something to be conquered and consumed rather than emulated and sustained. *Team Human* argues that the only way to escape this sickness is to shift perspective, widen context, re-situate the terms of debate, invert figure and ground, reverse the polarity. The whole book is an attempt to refocus our attention on what matters to us, on what makes us human, and on what we truly care about. We are not the problem; we’re the solution. Rushkoff calls for us to reconnect with the ground on which we stand, the communities we live in and the people with whom we conspire – literally those we breathe together with.

After our interview, an email pops up in my inbox from Rushkoff, perhaps embodying the uncomplicated, open-handed outreach at the heart of his *Team Human* message. It reads simply: “Let’s stay friends.” Go find the others.

# RADICAL ENERGY:



# A DISCUSSION WITH PENNY SLINGER

Rejected by second-wave feminists, radical artist Penelope Slinger turned to collage to remake her own reality. Tess Gruenberg talks to her about the transformational art of collage, the divine feminine and how to become your own muse

When sick as a child, Penelope Slinger would kill time by making collages. Learning young that a good remedy for boredom was creativity, she has now had a six-decade career of creating radical new realities out of old fragments.

Slinger first shocked the art world at the turn of the 70s with the publication of *50% The Visible Woman* – her first book of photographic collages, which subverted the tools of male surrealism by baring her own body as a detailed object of the feminine psyche. By objectifying herself, she haunted the silos of second-wave feminists and conservative cookie-cutters alike. Throughout the following decade, she continued to challenge the rigid paradigms of creativity, fearlessly playing both artist and muse while working in multiple media – film, theatre and sculpture – with the likes of experimental artists Jane Arden and her then-partner Peter Whitehead. Pushing the boundaries of eros was the name of the game.

In 1980, Slinger moved to the Caribbean and sought for many years to create without the pressures of an art world intent on commodifying all acts of resistance; it was only in 2009 that Slinger was reintroduced into the scene after her inclusion in the *Angels of Anarchy* exhibition at Manchester Art Museum.

Her mission as an artist remains strong: to uplift the divine feminine and equate a spiritual balance long out of whack. Following Slinger’s recent set design for Dior’s FW19 house couture show and the release of

Richard Kovitch’s *Penny Slinger – Out of the Shadows*, a documentary about her life and work, it is now obvious that her art is prophetic – a future feminism now present, where feminine and masculine transcend the biological, existing as divine energies in constant creative play.

What was your first encounter with collage as an art form? When I was researching for my thesis at Chelsea College of Art, I realised I loved the human form, not in a purely representational sense, but in a mythic, iconic, transformed and symbolic form. I saw this occur in the history of art, but I wanted to find this nearer to my lifetime in the era of modern art. It was then that I came across the collage books of Max Ernst – *Une Semaine de Bonité* and *La Femme 100 Têtes*. It was a revelation. I had not realised before that collage could be used in this seamless way to create whole new worlds of illusion! Max Ernst had used old engravings and pasted them together where you could not see the joins. Humans and creatures merged in this fantastic world of myth and dreams. I was fascinated and not only wrote my thesis on Max Ernst’s collage books, but created my own book of photographic collage, *50% The Visible Woman*, as a homage.

Surrealism was considered a man’s game. How did your expression of the feminine psyche advance the surrealist movement? Surrealism was considered a man’s game. How did your expression of the feminine psyche advance the surrealist movement?

I wanted to turn the inside out of the woman before me, namely myself, and display the findings through the revolutionary tools of collage and its ability to remake reality. One can consider surrealism a movement in the history of art, or as an approach to reality – an artistic reinvention that is multi-faceted in its nature, untied to the rules of convention, and limited only by the extent of the imagination. I just took these tools and applied them to radical self-expression as a woman. What does it mean to be your own muse?

It means you don’t ask anyone else to do anything you wouldn’t do yourself. And to make things even more straightforward, you do it yourself. You develop the ability to be in two places at once, the viewer and the viewed. You are presenting yourself through your own lens, subject and object all at once. On a very simple level, if we don’t find ourselves inspiring, that is a sorry state of affairs. There is endless inspiration in unravelling the mystery of the self and how it interacts with the world around it. It is fascinating to examine how we are seen and how we see ourselves.

You shocked the art world with visual statements about how female bodies are seen and objectified. Now we live in an image culture in which it is increasingly difficult to shock an audience, what is the role of shock in art now?

The shock of recognition is probably the best joint an artwork can offer. That recognition may come from a deep and hidden place, but in that moment of encounter, it can stir something deep within the viewer. I think intensity of purpose can feel shockingly real. Art done just for shock value may only have a brief life, but – when done with intrinsic conviction – will resonate beyond its times, even while being appropriate to them. Making a spectacle of oneself. I have been doing that for a long time and (am) not stopping now, using my body at this age as my current muse. That is still a bit shocking.

What are some misconceptions about the divine feminine? I would prefer rather to define her qualities. What do we mean by the divine feminine? The goddess. She has many forms. The aspect of divinity which enhances all embodiment as well as all spirit, that brings awareness of the sacredness of all living things. As the rise of the feminine is upon us, to balance out the male domination that has been prevalent for so long, the wise know that for this new era to bring much needed transformation, it is the higher qualities – of compassion, cooperation, empathy and heart wisdom – that we all need to cultivate. These are attributes of the divine feminine and her imminence is best expressed by bringing these values into play as the guiding lights of the new feminism of Earth.

In *An Exorcism and your recent work with Dior*, you play with the symbol of the house. What does that mean to you? We all have to live somewhere, don’t we? We live in our bodies, and those bodies for the most part live in clothes. Those clothed bodies live in houses. As with many other aspects of the mundane world, I like to take the elements of the house and shake them up and re-examine them. In my series of doll houses in the 70s, I transformed doll houses into harbinger of fantasies and dreams, abodes of the psyche and subconscious, not just material edifices. In *An Exorcism*, I took a large derelict mansion house and made it a container for the different aspects of my psyche, opening the door to each room to explore another aspect of my inner self. So I have used and continue to use the house as not just what it appears to be and its practical value, but as a symbol for, and exchangeable with, the body of a living being, haunted with the spirits that abide there.

What do you think needs radical rethinking in the art world? It’s not just the art world but the whole of culture and society that needs rethinking right now! Would we be on the brink of complete system failure of our whole ecosystem if we had been living by the right guiding principles? I think we are looking at a revolution occurring, where for the first time in history I know of, the art world is starting to take notice of women artists. I am particularly happy for this as I am a woman and I, along with other aspiring women artists, have been

marginalised throughout art history as we know it, hoping this is our time to step into the light. If the energy of the feminine can really permeate the world of art, it will automatically create an internal revolution and shifting of values. Let’s hope this comes to pass, both for the world of art and the world in general.

Is opting out of the art world a form of resistance? The only career you affect by such resistance is your own! I did make choices that did not support my career as an artist. But life has woven me back into the art world, and for that I am very grateful, as – despite thinking that I could build my whole career outside of it – I found that I need to be in it to be visible. So I guess in life it’s a question of resisting or embracing where appropriate.

What does liberation look like to you, and how can resistance help us get there? All that is born must die; that which outlasts these cycles is the only true liberation and that is the cultivation of the spirit which inhabits the flesh. While here on earth, I have been trying to free myself and by extension others from the things that bind them and stop them from reaching their true potential. High on that list has been the liberation of the feminine, as that energy had been stifled and suppressed for a very long time.

How that liberation looks to me is being free to express and embody the multi-dimensional beings that we truly are. Free to feel in our whole sentient bodies, with full sensitivity and awareness, capable of experiencing bliss. As for resistance, we do not want to become what we resist, but it is useful to put practices in place that help us resist negative trains of thought. We can replace un-useful patterns of thought with positive ones. In whatever situation we find ourselves, the freedom of our consciousness is the only freedom we truly own and have control over.

The other resistance I can recommend is resisting following the patterns that are presented to us to live by. Just because there is common consensus in these matters does not mean it is the optimal choice. The holders of power seem to think they need to control people to ensure productivity, but this is mistaken. We are the most productive when we can do what we love. So resist the system in order to find out what you are passionate about, then embrace that with all you are.

Clockwise from left: *Compromise to Form a Solution* (1969), *Way Through* (1969–77), *The Surprised Tin Opener* (1969), *Don’t Look* (1969), *Rosebud* (1973), all by Penny Slinger



# OUT OF THE SHADOWS

Director Richard Kovitch on how he came to make a documentary about the pioneering radical artist Penelope Slinger

It’s fitting that chance introduced me to the world of Penny Slinger.

In my film about her extraordinary life, *Penny Slinger: Out of the Shadows*, she observes: “Any great work of art has to be a combination of intention and divine accident.” I’ll leave others to decide whether greatness applies in this instance, but certainly the long and arduous process of making the film provided ample evidence of the intense role intention and divine accident play in the creative process. On seeing Penny’s work for the first time at the Riflemaker Gallery in London in late 2012, I had no idea how all-consuming my journey would be – four years in total. But when you start unearthing a universe as expansive yet undocumented as Penny’s, there is no alternative but to submerge yourself fully in the material. So into the shadows I delved.

Making the film was never easy – for every lucky break, a new obstacle presented itself. Most difficult of all was persuading the filmmaker Peter Whitehead to become involved. As a key collaborator during Penny’s formative years, he had many unique contributions to make. It took several years before he finally relented, eventually offering us exclusive excerpts of Lilford Hall, the hypnotic, previously unseen 16mm film he co-directed with Penny in 1969. But beyond these practical difficulties, it was the response to Penny’s resuscitated career that cast a fascinating light on how the western world still feels even now about well-established taboos: beauty, the body, femininity, transgression, cultural appropriation. As the critic Maxa Zoller observes in the film: “The binaries are not working any more. The ‘Me’ and the ‘Other’ doesn’t work any more. That’s why Penny is interesting again, because she worked before the theorisation and categorisation of certain politics and certain poetics. And she hovers between the archaic and the modern, the inside and the out, the male and the female. She’s not exclusive.”

From one perspective, the current era feels right for Penny’s re-entry into the culture. The internet has accelerated exposure to alternative viewpoints. Art created by women is no longer presented as a footnote to art created by men. Ideas around sexuality and gender have proven great disrupters, securing new legal rights while undermining heteronormative hegemony.

Yet from another perspective, Penny and her work still sit outside the rigidities of the current status quo. Her use of beauty; the different cultures she embraces in her collages; her positive thoughts about masculinity, which are carefully balanced alongside her advocacy of the feminine; her resistance to puritanism in all its forms; she continues to push buttons. Her full-frontal collages are still not permitted on book covers in the US, and her work has antagonised Japanese customs officials. Indeed, we were all surprised when *Out of the Shadows* was given an ‘18’ certificate (rated ‘R’) by the British Board of Film Classification due to “strong sexual images and nudity”. Meanwhile, films that harbour graphic depictions of violence secure ‘15’ certificates or less. Evidently there are many battles still to be won, not least against the neo-reactionism that continues to pollute political discourse on both sides of the Atlantic.

We can rely upon Penny to fight these battles. Both her classic pieces and her new work map our deepest anxieties and desires, embracing a combination of intention and divine accident so we might see ourselves anew – not as we wish to be seen, but as we really are. Such revelations are the achievement of all great artists. It has been an honour for me to help shine a light on a master practitioner in this arena, especially now, when her visions and ideas have never felt so urgent.

Go to [pennyslingerfilm.com](http://pennyslingerfilm.com) for more about Penny Slinger – *Out of the Shadows*



“MAKING A SPECTACLE OF ONESELF – I HAVE BEEN DOING THAT FOR A LONG TIME AND AM NOT STOPPING NOW, USING MY BODY AT THIS AGE AS MY CURRENT MUSE. THAT IS STILL A BIT SHOCKING”



# RADICAL POPTIMISM

K-POP

The most misunderstood band on Earth? A tribute to BTS, the most disruptive, wonderfully radical group in pop. By Colleen Nika

BTS: the most talked-about band on Earth. The most misunderstood band on Earth. The band you're missing out on. Yes, they're a seven-member boy band from South Korea. But also the most culturally disruptive, radical thing the pop world has seen since MIA. The impact of BTS, especially, critically and culturally, is hard to overstate. Their sales are enormous: over 15 million albums sold since 2013, most of them coming in the past two years, since their global popularity exploded. Their current album, the Jungian-timed *Map of the Soul: Persona*, is the best-selling album in the year globally, having hit the 4 million mark in only a few months. They are the most popular band in Trump's America, singing almost entirely in Korean, yet scoring their third No 1 album in under a year, a feat last achieved by the Beatles. They've sold out the Rose Bowl, Wembley and other stadiums in record time. I could fire off statistics all day; it's tempting when they are so singular in scope. Anyway: BTS are THE zeitgeist, and for good reason. They – and their incredibly engaged, organised fanbase, ARMY – are forcing western gatekeepers to evolve or get left behind.

My own entry point came through repeated subconscious exposure to their name on Twitter and other social platforms and, eventually, their braggadocio-fuelled rap anthem 'Mic Drop' (named for Obama's speech-ending gesture at the White House Correspondents' Dinner in 2016). Obscenely sharp and catchy, it was a subtle fuck-you to the haters and critics, while also a welcome display of their ability to spit rapid-fire rhymes – rare in this age of xanny slur trap. It was impressed, especially when I realised the song had taken over US Tunes and was getting considerable stateside radio airplay (sure, via a tweaked Steve Aoki and Designer-assisted remix, but it was still radical stuff alongside Marshmello and Shawn Mendes). So, a decade after MIA's 'Paper Planes' smuck on Top 40 radio and turned it upside down, a Korean group was infiltrating the system... while singing in Korean. This was something fresh, exciting and unsanctioned. I became curious about what else these young disruptors had up their sleeve. And down the rabbit hole I went.

Soon, I was in a whirlwind of discovery on YouTube. I learned their names and roles in the band, which I later learned is ARMY code for a point of no return. (By the way, they are: rapper/producers Kim 'RM' Nam-joon, Min 'Suga' Yoon-gi, Jung 'J-Hope' Ho-seok and vocalists Kim 'V' Taehyung, Kim Seok-jin, Jeon Jung-kook and Park Jim-in.) All members are 26 and incredibly handsome, what? I mean, they all dance and compose, some also choreograph, shoot film and design. Signed to the Seoul-based indie label turned major label Big Hit, they also collaborate with a larger in-house team of producers, cinematographers and creative directors. Video viewing is paramount to appreciating BTS, who take the medium more seriously than any artist since MTV's heyday, and in fact have helped inspire western artists to get their shit together visually again. As with anything aesthetically good, I felt the need to research what I was experiencing, which only got more complex as I googled. A pop group as inspired by sci-fi as Grimes is? Lyrics and video treatments inspired by Hermann Hesse's *Demian*? A video paying tribute to Le Guin's *The Ones Who Walk Away From Omelas*? Haruki Murakami references galore? And that's the tip of the literary iceberg (look up the Bangtan Universe to uncover a Marvel-esque labyrinth of surprises and twists that still unwind to this day). It was all terribly clever, sophisticated and unprecedented. Raised on spiky outsider pop made by underdogs, I was sold.

Fairly or not, no one expects a boy band to shake things up too much. 'N Sync and Backstreet Boys may have moved the commercial needle for teen acts during the Y2K Orlando Pop explosion, but were hardly expanding horizons philosophically or musically. BTS stand out from those acts of the past, as well as from any kindred spirit today, except maybe Brockhampton, a similarly adventurous post-boyband collective. But parallels are to be found with earlier pop and hip-hop trailblazers. The intricate storytelling prowess shown in songs like 'Blood, Sweat & Tears' and 'Fake Love' recalls existentially anxious pop poets Pet Shop Boys, and other British influences like garage and 90s acid jazz appear on recent albums on songs like 'Trivia: Just Dance' and '134340' respectively. Meanwhile, BTS's past work as an underground hip-hop crew evokes hip-hop legends Wu-Tang Clan, where every member held their own special ability – or even Koolhaas and Deltron 3030, the mind-bending rap artists who made mythology, world-building and alternate universes vital to their expression. On that note: let's not forget Gorillaz, whom Deltron's Dan the Automator helped bring to US urban airwaves. In fact, I especially see links to Gorillaz, the only other genre-defiant band in the past 20 years who have a universe that could also be a graphic novel or movie. I have actually described BTS as a futuristic Gorillaz to people who otherwise may hold unfair presumptions. Jamie Hewlett, besides if you know exactly what I mean.

But beyond the impressively intellectual bent to their work, there's also seven guys going through the existential pains of youth. Many who love BTS relate to the band's underdog struggle and connect to their OG guys and soul: social discontent. Fueled by a need to voice the concerns of youth, BTS critique class inequities and societal pressure through a specifically Korean lens, quintessentially in early songs like 'No More Dream', 'Ape' and 'Silver Spoon (Baepsae)'. "The most important things in their music is about frustration among young people living in this society," says the music critic Kim Youngdae, who has written extensively on the band. "Insufferable socioeconomic inequality, a dysfunctional educational system that takes away dreams of youth, and a society that forces 'effort' as the only solution."

After enjoying frequent conversations with ARMY on Twitter, I was able to go a little deeper recently and tried to hear directly what's resonating most with them, lyrically and beyond.

"I wasn't in a great place when I became ARMY," wrote Sonya Walker, an 18-year-old fan from California. "Having music that makes you feel a little less alone helped me a lot.

The more I listened, the more their message resonated. I then "faced myself". I seriously thought about what I was doing in life and I realised I hadn't really been living. I was following the normal path society sets and it was making me completely and utterly miserable. I didn't do something because I wanted to. I did it because it's what I was told I was supposed to do. After that, I completely changed my plan in life."

BTS don't scream and provoke; they politely, artfully resist. Hence a song like 2017's 'Go Go', a reggae-tinted pseudo-party track that is actually a critique on the financial desperation of the millennial, trapped in a fruitless cycle of spending and nothingness. (Sample lyric: "There's no tomorrow; there's already a mortgage on my future.") The band being millennials themselves, the track implores empathy to anyone listening close enough to get it. As RM, who also acts as band leader, told *Billboard*: "It's not their choice, but brutal reality that forces people to live and spend as if there's no future."

"They were questioning the modern social contract that says if you go to school and work hard, you'll automatically have a nice life. 'Silver Spoon

(Baepsae)' says that contract is broken by the young," writes Cincinnati-based fan Chris Collins, 43, over email. "Schindlerbreaker" says it's broken for our parents, too."

With BTS, the personal, too, is political. They've spoken of their support for LGBTQ+ rights, an extremely rare move for a Korean artist, and offer something of a safe haven for fans of all sexual orientations and gender identities. (Pride flags are a common sight at BTS shows.) Mental health topics – also taboo in Korea – are no stranger to the band's material, and are especially relevant within the solo work of Min 'Suga' Yoon-gi, recorded under the name Agust D. "His song 'The Last' is very impactful," writes Walker. "The song starts with him talking about his struggles with mental health issues, including social anxiety, depression, and self-hatred. In South Korea (and most of the world), there's a stigma around mental illness. Many people are afraid that they'll be seen as 'weird' or 'broken', so to have an artist like Suga be completely open about his struggles is honestly revolutionary."

BTS are more candid than most, for sure, but it's not all doom and gloom either – this isn't the 90s. They survey what's wrong but instead of apathy, they forge strength. "Pop music tends to glorify or romanticise depression and frustration, and would not offer any healthy and constructive solutions," says Kim. "Optimism is often considered to be naive. However, BTS's music does not move toward defeatism, but always sees hope in frustration and reveals its will to change people and society. I think it moves fans."

Life's a bitch but you try anyway. Longed-for relief, not a death sentence. The only way out is through. Pop stars insisting it gets better can register as hollow (see: Katy Perry) but BTS eschew the pugilistic ugly duckling-to-swan redemption tale of American artists and, in the recent *Love Yourself* and *Map of the Soul* album series, instead find a zen-like serenity – and worth – in the plight of the ugly duckling itself. "I think they're still talking about that big picture social contract, but from a slightly different lens," says Collins of the band's use of pop as political art on tracks like 'Come Back Home' and 'Classroom Idea' was dangerously exciting and new at the time. In that era, K-pop was almost a renegade art form compared to what was considered mainstream, a far cry from the slick commercial juggernaut and pop ecosystem it later would become. In 2017, as part of a celebration of Taiji's 25 years in the industry, BTS released their own take on 'Come Back Home' and performed with him. In concert, he passed the torch to BTS, finding them worthy heirs of his message. "This is your generation now," he said.

It's a role BTS seem to take to heart beyond just music. As ambassadors for UNICEF, they've donated over \$1.4 million in album proceeds, and spoke at the UN in 2018 to launch Generation Unlimited, a youth-focused global education and employment initiative. Impressively organised and notably diverse, ARMY also veers toward socially conscious endeavours and activism. Organisations like One in an ARMY have helped raise money for LGBTQ+ refugees in Turkey, raise money for schools, bolster ecological efforts, and aid survivors of sex trafficking and trauma. Recently, BTS fans trended hashtags worldwide that brought awareness to the horrific fires in the Amazon, even as American news stayed mute on the issue. In general, the fans are acutely aware of injustice, and are not afraid to speak up on it – including when it comes to confronting music industry gatekeepers with their own xenophobia. One can only hope their energy positively impacts the 2020 election. (Yup, I believe they're that powerful.)

The intertextual dialogue happening between BTS and their fans is the exact opposite of the toxic brew of ugly Trumpist nationalism happening in the US," writes Collins. "To me, that's the magical energy that people are seeing and not understanding. BTS has created a virtuous cycle of infectious hope and optimism that crosses every language, cultural, or age barrier."

"We really want to make the boys proud and help them spread their message," agrees Walker. "I run a chapter of the March for Our Lives movement and every single day BTS inspire me to work harder, do more, and be better."

Above all, they acknowledge that our future sometimes feels stolen. The generations who connect to that reality. Both uniting within the promise that music, empathy and activism can, somehow, still win. Cynics: you can still try. It's up to you. "If you can't run, then walk," sing BTS. "If you can't walk, then crawl."

"BTS are a band who acknowledge that our future feels stolen. The generations who connect to that reality. Both uniting within the promise that music, empathy and activism can, somehow, still win."

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"I wasn't in a great place when I became ARMY," wrote Sonya Walker, an 18-year-old fan from California. "Having music that makes you feel a little less alone helped me a lot.

# NECKBEARD DEATHCAMP

BLACK METAL

'The project isn't really built for longevity' – an internet chat with the Chicago-based antifascist black metal band

It took us a few attempts to make contact with antifascist black metal outfit Neckbeard Deathcamp. When we finally got in touch, they laughed and apologised because their inboxes were currently a "dumpster of death threats". Good Trouble would be lying if we said we were completely up to speed with the intricacies of the contemporary underground metal scene, but this Chicago-based three-piece's deft use of fascist-trolling imagery, incredible lyrics and titles (their 2018 debut album is called *White Nationalism Is for Basement-Dwelling Losers*), and wicked sense of humor satirically endeared them to us.

What began as a one-off satirical recording project by a few lovers of the scene (all experienced musicians from other projects) motivated by a desire to mock and confront those extremists infiltrating and organising within it (i.e. NSBM – National Socialist black metal, aka neo-Nazi black metal) quickly became an actual touring project, with Kriegsmaster Hatesturm (vocals), Haizl Komrade (drums) and Superkommando Uherweiserschnitzel (guitar/bass) taking to the stage in ski masks while unleashing fuck-mocking songs mayhem with such memorably named songs as 'Shitpostnacht', 'MAGAphobe', and 'Please Respond (I Showed You My Penis)'.

So what now for Neckbeard Deathcamp, other than "riding the wave of Nazi tears"? The project isn't really built for longevity," admits Hatesturm via DM. "Maybe one more record down the line would be funny again. And then to reassemble under a blue moon to play smaller festivals with people we like. We're trying to organise as much as possible and donate all the fucking money."

Seven weeks of it. Our live show is about to start. I don't really do most of our shitposting on the bus inmo. Frankly, that was certainly the high-water mark. 90% of 'true kvlt' black metal fans are internet-only creatures and they spend all day whining on the comments threads about work like ours. Mask off. I'm a regular adult with multiple jobs and a well-adjusted social life. I'm not actually spending all of my time on the internet. I know it seems like I'm on Twitter 24/7, but I really do most of our shitposting on the bus inmo. Frankly, unless it's really funny, I don't even read all the way through the longform messages from dudes named things like Goatnuch88

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lyng. 4chan specifically had a humongous user base at one point, and those people didn't just vanish.

How much has 'extreme' music had to deal with the presence of extremist ideologies, and has that got worse or better over the years? It's really important to talk about ideologies not just as something abstract that bubbles up out of the swamp every hundred years, under a full moon. Ideologies are given purchase in art scenes by people. Movements are built by organisers. What extreme music has had to deal with are individuals who chose to use their power and influence to build footholds for bullshit. I forget that fuckin dude's name, the guy from Skrewdriver (*white supremacist Ian Stuart Donaldson, who died in a car crash in Derbyshire aged 36*) who can't do good. But that dude started making room for garbage, and people saw the consequences of that coming and they solved it.

People will always try to do shit like that, and you can just play whack-a-mole with them and their brackles until it's done. I kinda hate the way people always say folks like us and (Liverpoolian anarchist trio) Dawn Ray 'd are 'carving out a foothold' for antifascism in black metal... Because we're not doing that. Antifascism is the default position. To cut black metal loose as an inherently fascist music genre is dumb as fuck, on top of being not true. Black metal was successfully organised within by fascists.

The Brazilian black metal scene has been better than all that Norwegian crap since day one, it just doesn't have white Eurocentrism in journalism on its side. Also – real talk, I'm super tired of pretending Burzum 'had rifts'. When we made contact, you said your inbox was a 'dumpster of death threats'. Where does your personal desire to confront and destroy the far right come from?

I'm not gonna survive the Fourth Reich. Plain and simple. Homophobia is high enough as it is in this country, and I'm not gonna end up in some death camp with a shaved head and needles in my brain while some Mengele wannabe tries to figure out why I don't I don't always feel like a man and kiss dudes.

So many of my fucking friends are dead from the slings and arrows of this shit-hole country that rain down on us as we slave from dawn to dusk at meaningless jobs that I have an extremely hard time believing that handing over the controls to some fascist maniac whose platform is strictly built on increasing the rate of fire and thickness of the shaft on the volleys will be good for my health. Fuck you. For what it's worth, I'm much more into 'destroy 'than 'confront'. I heard recently that the F in Twitter 24/7, but I really do most of our shitposting on the bus inmo. Frankly, unless it's really funny, I don't even read all the way through the longform messages from dudes named things like Goatnuch88 any more. It's not interesting. I know the NPC meme is a fascist dehumanisation tactic, but it really seems a lot of these dudes are reading from a script. Come call me a faggot in person, it'll be way more fun. "You've been out and about on tour. Can you tell us about your recent experiences?"

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RECIPE CORNER

Three delightful recipes for the creatively minded.

Send us photos if you actually make any

## RECIPE FOR LEFTOVER

The fragrant toasty of catastrophic public shaming tastes just right after the palate-thickening stickiness of insincerity, glutinous wealth and self-serving Toryism. The whiff of colonial betrayal combines with the ugly funk of schadenfreude to produce something completely unforgettable. This recipe evokes French farce of the 17th century, in which the villain the enemy conforms to melodramatic type: be sure to prepare extra food to leave a fresh one for your guests who will thank you for it!

Ingredients

- 12 installation pieces (preferably over-ripened by market-rigging)
- 284ml mood-enhancing drugs in syrup suspension
- 100kg icing sugar
- Juice of a Coutts bank account
- 1 human heart
- 3 tablespoons staff/slave ambiguity

Instructions

Remove the preserved livestock from each of the installation pieces. Take great care not to be dismissive of the absence of intellectual content or the pronounced aesthetic cynicism. Remember that doubtful claims of self-referential market critique were once sufficient justification for vacancy. Reserve the formaldehyde for use later. Take each of the preserved animals – a good mix is perfect here, some ungulates, some marine life, really, you are limited only by the collector's imagination – and dismember publicly. You will need a team of butchers for the next stage as you want to retain every last shred of flesh, every last fillet of pickled life, every last vestige of predation.

Swallow the mood-enhancers. Sprinkle the icing sugar liberally. Really go for it! Sprinkle it wherever you like. Icing sugar tastes all the sweeter in greater quantities. Glug down the juice of the Coutts – I realise that this is a bit extravagant, but I find that it serves the cook better than the dish!

Mince the heart finely. The provenance of a human heart is always important so make sure you source this from a capable and discreet surgeon – there is a list at the back of this issue. Stir the minced heart into the prepared flesh of the pickled installation works. Turn out into a grassed mound. Bake in a pre-heated oven at gas mark 5 for several weeks. This is a long, slow cook – don't rush it, or the thing will spoil.

Finally, the trickiest part: staff-slave ambiguity has long been an ethical problem for the discerning chef. The loosening of EU regulations and the economic cycle of boom and bust now mean that you can find yourself in a position of almost complete ambiguity – emotionally, ethically and professionally. The great pungency of such ambiguity is what really makes this dish sing. Serve with rice crackers on a bed of ivy and enjoy!

## RECIPE FOR TÊTE DE VEAU

Ingredients

- The entire heads of two white veal calves
- Four leeks
- Four onions
- Four carrots
- Four sticks of celery
- Peppercorns
- Salt
- A bouquet garni of parsley, thyme and bay
- One pike, cleaned and gutted

You will also require some specialist equipment for this recipe:

- A selection of razors
- A blowtorch
- A paring knife
- An axe
- A copy of *His Solitudes and Sufferings*
- A copy of *His Solitudes and Sufferings*
- A copy of Milton's *Defensio pro Populo Anglicano* (these need not be first editions; facsimile reproductions would be preferable to photocopies)

Note: Under treason felony, even imagining regicide is a crime.

Instructions

Write an invitation including the following text: "You are invited to a dinner of tête de veau, 30th January, RSVP." Include a secure return address. Do not trust email. You may include the following lyric sheet with your invitations:

Now let us sing, carouse and roar  
The happy day has come once more  
For to revel  
Is but civil  
As our fathers did before  
Who, when the tyrant would enslave us  
Chopped his calves head off to save us.

You must remove all skin, hair and fat from the heads. Residual fat will result in the finished dish having a bitter flavour. You will remove the hair by a combination of shaving and burning. The burning will produce a foul smell. Inhale it deeply. The particulate will enter your body through the olfactory membranes and certain biochemical responses will occur. The skin will be removed by cutting and pulling. Take care with the incisions. The skin will come away easily over the scalp but with difficulty around the eyes. Look into the eyes of a calf. What do you see? Imagine the calf carousing in a Las Vegas hotel room. Imagine its views on contemporary architecture. Imagine it marvelling outside of itself.

Remove the tongues from each head and reserve. Cleave one head in two laterally, aiming between the eyes. You may use a cleaver or an axe for this. Do not look into the eyes of the calf at this point in the recipe.

Poach each head with its tongue, two carrots, two leeks, peppercorns and plenty of salt. Poach over a low heat or in a cool oven (120C) for at least five hours. Test with a meat skewer. When the calf's head is ready, the skewer will pass through the meat with ease. Take care not to undercook. Allow the cleaved head to cool in the poaching liquid. Remove what is left of the eyes. You may want to peer into the sockets. What do you see?

The cleaved head you should then slice thickly, serving the meat with broth and slices of the calf's brain. Into the mouth of the cooled complete head, insert a pike. This represents tyranny. The other complete head should be allowed to poach for another few hours, cooled and stripped of all meat and sinew, to the bone. This is a toasting cup.

Order of Service

- Ceremonial burning of Eikon Basilike, *The Pourtrature of His Sacred Majesty in His Solitudes and Sufferings*
- Swearing of an oath over *Defensio pro Populo Anglicano*
- Singing of anthem
- Toast to patriots
- Dinner
- Collection (please give generously)

Note: "Qui, quoties suae sapientissimae menti complacuit esse, superbos et effrenatos reges, supra humanum modum sese attolentes, solio deturbare, et tota saepe cum domo funditus everit."

FREE SPEECH

A legendary streetwear brand with a 'scandalous' name, and an epic trademark battle that spans decades – founder Erik Brunetti reflects on a free speech battle that went all the way to the Supreme Court

Erik Brunetti founded FUCT in LA back in 1990. The pioneering lifestyle and streetwear brand became notorious in the 90s for controversial designs and imagery and "reappropriating corporate imagery and logos", as he explains – but each time he tried to register FUCT as a trademark, it was rejected (the US Patent and Trademark Office, or USPTO, has the power to refuse "immoral" or "scandalous" applications).

In 2019 Brunetti took his fight to the Supreme Court, arguing that his free speech protection under the First Amendment was being denied. At one point, a USPTO trademark trial and appeal judge described Brunetti's work as "assaults on American culture [that] critique capitalism, government, religion and pop culture", and called the FUCT approach "one of extreme nihilism". In a decision that has far-reaching implications, Brunetti won. Chris Shonting is a New York-based photographer who shoots fashion, music and youth culture. He visited Brunetti at home in LA, where they had this conversation about the case.

Aside from being a witty bending of one of the most commonly used words in western vernacular, what does your company's name mean?

I created FUCT with my friend Natas. We had a design firm together in the late 80s and early 90s. We were at a bar one night called the King King and decided we needed a name for our new venture, as we were getting a fair amount of jobs and wanted to be official. So I said, let's call it "Fucked" but spell it out "Fuct". The idea behind it was to have a very corporate-looking logo (which is same logo we still use today) and confuse people as to how it's pronounced. I've read so many non-truths about its inception, it's actually kinda funny.

I'm guessing seeing FUCT out there in the world for decades must give you a certain satisfaction, aside from a business or financial end.

Honestly, I don't see it as that offensive. It's always felt normal to me, maybe because I've seen it everyday for the last 30 years. I think Ruth Bader Ginsberg summed it up best in the Supreme Court, which was very similar to my thoughts about the brand – she said FUCT is probably not considered offensive in many circles, and among its peers, it's probably almost mainstream.

Could you explain your views on free speech?

My opinion is all speech should be free speech, even speech I disagree with or is considered highly offensive. I believe once words and dialogue are shut down or regulated, it creates a very slippery slope and would only open doors to even more regulation of speech, eventually eroding the First Amendment all together. The battle for free speech has now moved to the internet – social media posts are being suppressed or deleted because they go against the mainstream establishment's narrative. Speech





Sex Militant is a collective of artists and activists dedicated to liberating bodies from sexual oppression. Good Trouble talked to co-founder Jex Blackmore about transcending traditional activism, the power of spectacle and taking sex to the streets. Words by Tess Gruenberg. Photography by Alex Austin

# SEX MILITANT

Immersed in the intersectional worlds of performance art, sex rights activism and the occult, Jex Blackmore has made her mark as one of the key public figures transforming public spaces into educational spectacles. Her public advocacy has ranged from disrupting anti-abortion rallies with gallons of milk to empowering the correlation between Satanism and sociopolitical resistance. She has been labeled both religious heretic and feminist icon. Now the Detroit-based artist has developed another radical project, the sex-rights activist collective Sex Militant.

Sex Militant is simultaneously a coalition, a conviction and a direct-action collective. They make spectacle out of the oppressive and sticky relationship between state violence and eroticism, making clear the notion that free sexual expression is fundamental to the human condition. Most of all, Sex Militant is compelled by nontraditional forms of activism, as shown by its two-night premiere in Chicago in September 2019 of durational performances and participatory rituals that explored the tensions of resistance and submission. It is networked for action and committed to the fight for sexual rights, and there is no predicting how it will manifest next.

When was Sex Militant cooked up and why?  
We started thinking about Sex Militant in 2017. Many of us were organising projects in Detroit and wanted to start something focused specifically on sex rights. We had spent a long time thinking about the ways we could use collective action to implement change and empower each other in a way that was transformative, while avoiding the trappings of traditional activist organisations. To create a platform for liberation, play with direct action and spectacle-creating, and (provide) a space for people to be creative with their resistance.

What is the relationship between visibility and creating a spectacle?  
Visibility is a tool of resistance within the framework of oppression – it's about truth-telling. Should we eliminate the violence of erasure, visibility becomes a naughty word for people simply living their lives. Of course, the truth does not always reveal itself by virtue of being the truth – it must often be told in a way that motivates people to open their eyes.

We recognise the role spectacle plays in our lives. In advertising, news, entertainment and social media, our culture is formed on the basis of symbols, myths and fantasies disseminated through a series of viral moments that capture our attention for just a moment. However, those who control the spectacle are almost exclusively companies and individuals who enjoy a great deal of wealth and power. We believe that activists must enter the realm of spectacle to be politically effective and that these spectacles ought to be emancipatory, ethical and aid in manifesting action. The truth itself can be radical to those who it's unknown to – similarly, a system can be radicalised if it's seized by those it's intended to dominate.

How does the Sex Militant photo essay subvert the spectacle for good?  
The photo essay was an action in and of itself. Rather than casting professional models, the people who participated were stakeholders and collaborators who have been directly impacted by sexually repressive legislation. The production team, the organisers and the participants worked together to explore ways of visually representing the values and mission of Sex Militant through play and experimentation.

Having the space and freedom to produce a visual work, supported by a production team that donated their time and resources to the cause, was a testament to how collective action can support our community. Building strong relationships with one another through creative efforts is a revolutionary action that is often overlooked but is critical to the movement.

Can an individual achieve liberation alone or is being part of a collective necessary?  
The individual is interwoven into the collective. None of us can be liberated until all of us are free. The concept of individual liberation in the US often takes the form of white colonisers hiding behind a thin liberal veneer, using superficial performative lifestyle changes to soak up their guilt – or, worse, individuals who believe they are liberated because they have embraced the oppression of others as a result of mistaking their proximity to power for freedom.

Collective struggle is necessary because this struggle will span generations, and because individualism is a white supremacist fantasy, and because we all have so much to learn, and so little time to learn, that we must teach and support one another. Simply opting out of the hegemonic power structure isn't enough. We must dismantle it, which will leave a vacuum. Something will fill that void, and it must be liberatory from the ground up.

‘WE ARE YOU, AND YOU ARE ONE OF US’

## — JEX BLACKMORE

Sex Militant is a conviction, action and a coalition developed by a collective of artists and activists committed to sexual revolution and liberation through performance, advocacy and direct action.

We believe that the free expression of sexuality is critical to our physical, emotional and social wellbeing and that each human being is entitled to full bodily autonomy and integrity. However, the state has sought to police sexual identities, reproduction and sexual behaviours between consenting individuals through repression, marginalisation and punishment.

Let us be clear: sexual oppression and discrimination is violence, and we are fighting back. The sexual rights of all persons must be protected, respected and fulfilled.

To be sex-militant is to be fiercely committed to the advancement of sexual and

reproductive liberation. We are you, and you are one of us. We are no longer waiting for representation and permission to challenge the daily injustices levied against our bodies. We, who have limited power and resources, will innovate and develop tactics that meet our needs and engage in strategies that are justifiable in response to the force of those who seek to control us. We weaponise the perversion of our sexuality and our bodies as a liberating force.

Power concedes nothing without a fight. Society's discomfort with public expressions of sexuality is a symptom of moral tyranny, and we threaten this tyranny through visibility, performance and political confrontation. Action, directed and organised by the people, is necessary. The power structures that benefit and profit from sexual oppression will be destroyed.

“Society's discomfort with public expressions of sexuality is a symptom of moral tyranny, and we threaten this tyranny through visibility, performance and political confrontation.”

Social media personas can be an uplifting tool for folks to find their voice. Is there room for the individual beyond the realm of superfluity?

The individual has the right to express themselves in a way that fits best for their needs, interests and desires. We need healthy individuals who support collectives so that we can all experience a level of individual freedom and expression. There are queer people who live in rural areas now able to connect and feel safe through conversation and expression online – but you also have a bunch of aggressive young men who have found the same exact platform. Social

media has grown to be such a monolith of social interaction and organising that we forget that the real experience between people on the ground is the true form of liberation. We've seen this time and time again in creating live spectacles and public performances. People are transformed by actually having to confront the reality.

One of the collective's goals is to engage younger generations. How do you inspire kids to storm the streets when much of their time is spent in virtual spaces?

The youth are often the driving force in many revolutionary movements, and social media has successfully disarmed would-be activists by creating a platform for participation that's exclusively relegated to expressions of virtual and performative dissent, rather than direct engagement. Social norms tell people that they don't have the power to organise, or to impact the news cycle, or to have their voice be heard unless they participate in actions that are prescribed as appropriate activism. Our goal is to get our community on the street and experimenting with arbitrary regulations imposed upon free expression and political advocacy.

Street art is an easy access point in this way. We have organised many banner-drops and wheat-pasting campaigns, and encourage people to target visible and strategic public spaces. It seems like a very minor action, but it is actually quite liberating if you've never done something like that before. A message from the people for the people directly challenges powers who would prefer us to stay hidden behind our screens, panicking over which information can be trusted. Get on the street and talk to each other by any means necessary!

The pillars of Sex Militant concern a wide spectrum of sociopolitical issues, all connected under a larger umbrella that holds state power as its natural enemy. How do coalitions of resistance resist dogma?

Simply put, we believe that the state does not have the power to regulate our bodies – dogma is bad when it is static, oppressive or otherwise flawed. Passionate adherence to truth will be called dogma by its detractors (by those it threatens), and the answer is not to betray the truth.

The imagery of Sex Militant incites playfulness. What is the role of play in the culture of resistance?

It is essential to enjoy life, to celebrate each other, to love, and fuck and play. These are basic human needs. It is imperative that what we fight against does not overshadow what we are fighting for.

sexmilitant.com

“IT IS ESSENTIAL TO ENJOY LIFE, TO CELEBRATE EACH OTHER, TO LOVE, AND FUCK AND PLAY THESE ARE BASIC HUMAN NEEDS. IT IS IMPERATIVE THAT WHAT WE FIGHT AGAINST DOES NOT OVERSHADOW WHAT WE ARE FIGHTING FOR”





10

TAKING HISTORY

When history was being made, he was there with camera in hand, responsible for some of the most iconic images of the American civil rights movement. Steve Schapiro sat down with Florian Sturm to reflect on the death of Martin Luther King, travelling with James Baldwin, and why he's still learning his craft at the age of 85



There is probably no other photojournalist who covered the American civil rights movement in such an embedded way as Steve Schapiro. The Brooklyn-born photographer documented history on the March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom in August 1963, and the Selma to Montgomery marches two years later. Since the beginning of his career in 1961, Schapiro has followed a lifelong interest in social documentary. That’s why he was never really able to separate his roles of photographer and activist, whether photographing stories about migrant workers in Arkansas and drug addicts in Harlem, following James Baldwin on his speaking tour through the US, or accompanying Robert Kennedy during his 1968 presidential campaign.

Schapiro’s images have been published in magazines such as *Life*, *Look*, *Time*, *Newsweek*, *People*, *Paris Match*, *Rolling Stone* and *Vanity Fair*. In the 70s, he began working for film studios and produced iconic stills for movies such as *The Godfather* and *Taxi Driver*, before celebrity portraiture became another of his professional footholds (he has shot Muhammad Ali, Andy Warhol, Ray Charles, Samuel Beckett, Robert de Niro, David Bowie and Jodie Foster, to name a few). Schapiro remains active in photography to this day, having recently documented the Black Lives Matter movement. Which image comes to mind when you think of your six-decade career?

There are various, because you’ve got all those different phases of my work. One of my favourite photos is a Martin Luther King picture. When he was shot, I went to the room of the Lorraine Motel, where he had stayed. On a ledge was an open attaché case with different things in it. Right next to it were a few shirts, as well as used Styrofoam cups. One the wall sat a television set and the image of King came up behind the commentator. I photographed this whole scene as one picture. To me, it’s a strong photograph as the physical man was gone forever, yet his material things remained and he still hovers above us in a way.

“BACK THEN, YOU DIDN’T THINK WHILE YOU WERE TAKING PICTURES THAT THEY WOULD BE SEEN 50 YEARS LATER... YOUR BASIC CONCERN WAS: DO I HAVE A PICTURE THAT WILL APPEAR IN THE MAGAZINE NEXT WEEK?”

PHOTOGRAPHY

TAKING HISTORY

Did photography back then have the potential to actually bring about change?

Some of them certainly did. Charles Moore covered the civil rights movement in Birmingham, Alabama, in 1963. (Moore’s pictures) were very important photos in terms of proving that photojournalism is actually effective. Those pictures changed the attitude of America regarding what was happening to the black community in the south.

How can photographs help society in general go through rough political times today?

Currently, things are so overwhelmed regarding the president we have that images have lost some of their power. Sometimes an image helps you to understand a person or something about them. This man exemplifies who he is every time he opens his mouth. We’re in the middle of a very bad and dangerous situation.

Another reason for the decreasing influence of images is simply the unlimited availability. Photography is everywhere these days.

That’s true as well. We see so many pictures that our mind hardly ever singles out one specific image to represent a whole viewpoint.

Can there be iconic images today?

Creating truly iconic images today comes down to the question of seeing things differently. I mean, how does the evolution of art work? You’ve got the impressionists, who were mocked by their times, you have the pop movement in America, which at first was belittled and now is extremely important. That way, you always have new ideas coming up and art is always at the forefront of many things. Sometimes they are hardly noticed, sometimes they shock – but that way, they open up new ways of thinking for many people. Art has the potential to really change the morality of a nation or even the world. Photography does, too, but the innovative potential isn’t as big. In what way does this photographic overload we’re exposed to also come into play in terms of the innovative potential of photography?

There were a lot less photographers. About five or six really good ones documenting the civil rights movement. This has all changed now. Four months ago, I saw a picture of Obama in the *New York Times* – a sensational image. And yet it’s gone because there are so many pictures these days. Whereas you used to depend on big magazines to see what was happening in the world, everybody has a smartphone now. Does this citizen photojournalism impact you in any way as a professional photographer?

No, because it still is important who you are. We all have a different points of view and a different way of looking at things. On the Selma march, there were three really good photographers – Bruce Davidson, James Karales and me. We all covered the same event and even shot the same boy who had ‘Vote’ written in big letters on his forehead. But all photos are different. How has witnessing these numerous pivotal moments in history changed your personal perspective on life?

It hasn’t. (*Turns and asks his wife, Maura*) Has it changed my view on life, Maura?

Maura: Of course it has! Most of what Steve does now is taking pictures of protests and social issues. Whenever I say to him, you know, so-and-so is coming to Chicago and you should see if they want to do a photo, he always goes: “No.” You photographed the civil rights movement, police aggression, segregation and racism five decades ago. Now we’re experiencing a similar political atmosphere in the US, do you think: “We’ve been through that, haven’t we?”

There’s a picture I did in 1965 of a middle-aged black woman. She’s holding up a sign which reads ‘Stop Police Killings’. For me, that resonates today the same way. There may not be as many situations and not all troopers are there to stop a nonviolent movement, but individual members of the police still appear in a very aggressive nature.

Maura: Steve, do you think a photographer can counteract this situation with Trump with images to show another side of America?

Right now, America is extremely engrossed in emotionalism on both sides that it’s not going to change much. Charles Moore’s pictures of Alabama, however, changed America, because the country was undecided. People simply did not understand what was happening in the south. Today, you have people who understand what’s going on and they either support Trump and say, “Don’t mind what he talks, because what he does is great for America,” or who oppose him and think he is a danger to democracy. You once said: “In the world of photography, nothing is real. Above all, you cannot equate it with the truth... The truth lies in the hands of the photographer editor. They decide what is true.” What do you mean by that?

The photographer decides when to push the button and we assume that’s truth. On the one hand, it is, but on the other hand, it only gives us a fraction of time, a fraction of truth. Ultimately, it’s the editor who

decides which image to use, and by that shapes the narrative for a whole nation or even the world. Can you give an example?

Take Alfred Eisenstaedt’s famous image that he took of Joseph Goebbels in 1933 – Goebbels was sitting in his stiff chair, with this demonic look on his face and an aide hovering over him, all in black suits. 15 minutes prior to that, Eisenstaedt photographed Goebbels with a huge smile. Both these pictures went to *Time* magazine and it was the editor’s choice of which image was going to give people an idea of where the Nazi regime was at or where it could lead. Many people say a picture never lies. But it does. Do you think a photojournalist needs to have a certain talent?

It’s who you are and how you react to things. I always liked to follow someone who has come before you and try to copy him.

In your case, Henri Cartier-Bresson...

Right. He has been one of the all-time greats to watch. There certainly were times when I was trying to copy his particular style.

What fascinates you about him?

The fact he was able to catch things at the height of their moment, that he had a great sense of design in his photographs, and at the same time gave you some information about the situation he was capturing. But most of all, he hit an emotional, sometimes extremely symbolic moment regarding his subject – even if he was just capturing Henri Matisse in his studio. There was something about the photograph that made you want to come back to it.

Was there a key moment when you were certain you could earn enough money?

I never thought about that very much. It really wasn’t a concern of mine. I just became interested in trying to take better images. Initially, I felt I was a second-grade photographer. Hence, I was constantly asking myself how to get better. I’m still trying to figure that out today. I don’t feel I’ve mastered the craft to perfection. Far from that. But I still have time.

*Clockwise from top left: Martin Luther King (1965); Martin Luther King’s Motel Room Hours After He Was Shot, Memphis (1968); Selma Organizer (1965); The Worst Is Yet To Come (1965); Stall-In (1965). All images by Steve Schapiro / Courtesy of Camera Work*



HOUSE OF LIES

Photographer Roman Kutzowitz has worked in numerous refugee camps across Europe, documenting the plight of those in camps, safe houses and on the streets. Last year, he began to collaborate with them directly, giving images out to write on. As activist Elie Wiesel wrote: ‘How can a human being be illegal?’



TOP TEN

READ FOR HELP

Kevin Braddock selects ten books to help with recovery from depression, anxiety or addiction, or just for when you're feeling lost in life

1. Bessel van der Kolk – *The Body Keeps the Score*  
To live is to be traumatised, and few of us escape trouble in our lives. This extraordinarily kind and perceptive book explains the working of trauma underneath or behind depression, anxiety and addiction and much more, along with ways it can be healed.
2. Gabor Maté – *In the Realm of Hungry Ghosts*  
In which the world-leading authority on addiction persuasively argues that drugs don’t cause addiction, instead childhood experiences do. But addiction is never a life sentence – even the worst may be recovered from.
3. Dr Tim Cantopher – *Depressive Illness: The Curse of the Strong*  
Automatising depression and/or burnout, crisis or ‘nervous breakdown’ as the failure of an overloaded limbic system. The central message: take it real easy. “The harder you push recovery,” Cantopher writes, “the slower it goes.”
4. Nassim Nicholas Taleb – *The Black Swan* and *Antifragile*  
Nominally books about probability (Taleb was a financial trader), but underneath is a philosophy for living under conditions of complexity, or as he puts it, “decision-making under uncertainty”. Adaptivity (not expecting things to be certain any time soon) is key.
5. Haruki Murakami – *What I Talk About When I Talk About Running*  
What dedication can do for your life (Murakami runs many miles every day), plus a philosophy of the body and how it adapts when it’s clearly instructed what to do.
6. Vincent Deary – *How We Are*  
Examining the mechanics of life change, more simply what happens when people through decision or accident come to a point of making a big shift. The author is a psychotherapist. Read this is you’re going through eh-ch-ch changes.
7. Carl Rogers – *On Becoming a Person*  
Rogers founded the person-centred humanistic school of psychotherapy in the 1950s and 60s and this, the centrepiece of his work, is about how people change and grow when in an empathic relationship with others. You’ll grow simply by reading it.
8. John Powell – *Why Am I Afraid to Tell You Who I Am?*  
Open up, show your fears and shames, stop hiding, tell the truth, let yourself be seen. This book was rightly a bestseller in its era, along with its companion piece, *Why Am I Afraid to Love?*
9. Marcus Aurelius – *Meditations*  
Stoicism is back in fashion, but it never really went away. The former Roman emperor’s thoughts on how to live by practising acceptance, humility, self-knowledge and reason.
10. Lao Tzu – *Tao Te Ching*  
The central Taoist text, which can be baffling as well as consoling. For further explanations, read practically anything by Alan Watts.

Kevin Braddock is author of *Everything Begins With Asking For Help* (Kyle Books), *torchlightsystem.com*

‘EVEN IN KREUZBERG I CAN SMELL THE BURNING REMNANTS OF BRITAIN’

The late radical poet Sean Bonney wielded words like weapons, and his last collection grapples with the desperation and horror of Brexit-era Britain. Huw Nesbitt met him in Berlin a few months before his death in November 2019

The following interview with the late English radical poet, Sean Bonney, took place in Berlin in July 2019, prior to his death in November. We met at Café Kotli, a long-running left solidarity bar in the former Western district overlooking Kottbusser Tor’s uhhah station. He was 50 years old, and for the last four years had been teaching seminars on radical verse at the Free University of Berlin’s John F Kennedy Institute, hosting classes on African-American writers such as Amiri Baraka, as well as surveys on his contemporaries Joshua Clover and Anne Boyer, among others.

The defining aspect of his poems is arguably the way in which they combine personal reflection with historical observation, superimposing sordid scenes from life under late capitalism against a backdrop of war and austerity. “*Even in Kreuzberg I can smell the burning remnants of Britain*,” he writes in ‘A Butcher’s Lullaby’, a prose-verse fragment from his collection *Our Death*, which was published by Commune Editions in 2019. The true radical content of Bonney’s writing is its ability to, on the one hand, describe these experiences, and on the other, in restoring them, to offer the possibility that history and human social relations might function differently.

With his demise, the world has not only lost one of its brightest poets but also one of its greatest political observers. In his recent collection, the spectre of the UK’s ongoing political crisis looms large. Throughout ‘On Throwing Bricks’, for example, he describes finding a builder’s block by a canal and, after picking it up and dropping it over and over again while screaming, names the resulting fragments “*The bones of Boris Johnson. The face of Theresa May*” – an apt sentiment for Britain today. The proceeding dialogue captures some of the topics we discussed, including the content of this collection, the purpose of political poetry and why he continued to write despite fearing the worst.

Rest in peace, Sean.

What is the background to *Our Death*?

*Our Death* is two separate sequences, but they mirror each other as well. There’s a section called ‘Cancer’ which are poems based on and in honour of the Greek anarchist poet Katerina Gogou, and there’s a section of prose poems called ‘Our Death’... using the form to comment on political developments in Britain. It started off about Brexit but expanded into something else.

One of the things the book is about is the death of a certain kind of politics. We lived through the student movement and the 2011 (London) riots, and the book is about the psychological fallout of living through a failing social movement. It’s kind of written out of the history of those times. When people talk about those Tory governments, they don’t talk about London being on fire, it’s disappeared. That’s another aspect of the ‘death’ in the title.

The book seems concerned with an inarticulable sense of horror, as in the poem, ‘A Riot Is a Haunt’, where you write: “We are desperate we are fabulous we are Possibly dead.” In your essay ‘Letter Against the Language’ you say “the inexpressible in language” is constituted by “The names of power. The forbidden syllables.” In

“How do you write about what’s going on now? We’re living through a mass extinction event; there’s also an international revival of fascism. In poetry, you can write about how that affects you personally. The difficulty is making it not just about me – it’s gotta get beyond that.”

know what else to do. Bloch was writing about the 30s, and the book that quote is from is terrifying to read. The question my book asks is: how do you live through this without going completely crazy? Or do you even want to not go crazy?

What then is the purpose of writing political poetry today?

I’m contributing to a wider discussion. And what I can do is talk about how we are being affected psychologically and physically. Rimbaud, for instance,

was writing at the time of the Paris Commune, [and] the surrealists in the 20s saw him as a poet of the psychological transformations that you undergo when you are in a revolutionary moment. The political is an aspect of poetry. For a long time, I was an activist and a writer, and these two things were fighting within me.

One of your older poems, ‘After Rimbaud’, contains the line “When you meet a Tory in the street cut his throat / It will bring out the best in you”. In the run-up to the 2015 election, it was widely shared. Do you think poetry should have an ethical obligation?

That’s a tricky one. After Jo Cox was murdered by that fascist, it has made me wonder whether I would read that poem out again. I got very bothered about that line because you would see people on Twitter quote it every time a Tory did something obnoxious. “Take Sean Bonney’s advice!” And I’m like, “Dude, it wasn’t advice.” I remember when I first read that poem out, people went mad. I wrote that after I got home from the demo at Millbank (*Conservative Party HQ in London, which was attacked by anti-austerity protesters in October 2010*) and I put it on my blog the next day.

If someone was interested in radical poetry but didn’t know where to start, who would

be your go-to poets for them?

Pasolini. Anna Mendelsohn. Amiri Baraka. Katerina Gogou. Allen Ginsberg. William Blake. They’re all massively important. They are the ones that inspire me. Lots and lots of poets moan about political poetry, but many of the most important poems are political, be they by Shelley or Brecht. That’s the stuff that carries power and that continues to be interesting.

*Our houses are packed so close  
They are no longer houses. Get that.  
These our beds these our scraps of food  
We eat with the same mouth. We no longer  
Use our bones. We are desperate we are fabulous we are Possibly dead.  
4 in the morning. Sleep fuck get high and that monster in the sky taking our details.  
Ghosts walk at noon. Everyone’s a weapon.  
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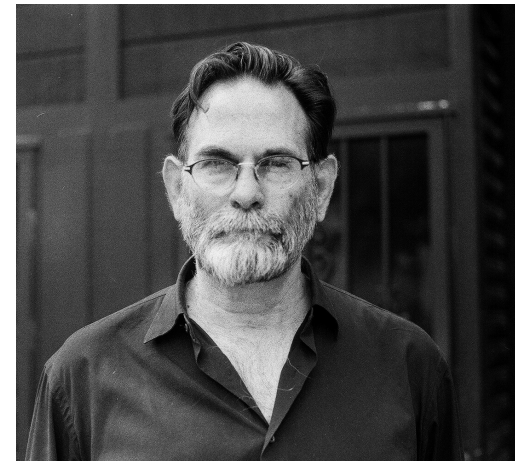
*There is no time. Our houses  
concealed, like songs, mumble to themselves  
The stars are not stars, the city sounds not city sounds. The sirens, the cops,  
however, they are real as algebra or teeth are real like Lazarus who never even  
lived & like a plague or like a loved one’s shadow Here I am alone*



# ACTING UP WITH AVRAM FINKELSTEIN

ACTIVISM

Avram Finkelstein is a renowned artist and AIDS activist and a founding member of the legendary Gran Fury, ACT UP and Silence=Death collectives. Tess Gruenberg sat down with him to talk about the history of queer resistance and using culture against itself



For Avram Finkelstein, resistance is perennial; a continuous string of gestures that passes from one generation to the next. The legendary activist plays the long game, and like someone cultivating fertile soil, makes room for resistance and trusts that something great will grow.

His activism was born out of the AIDS crisis in the New York City, where he bore witness to the violent atrocities of political inaction. His queer community – once silenced and divided – harnessed biting humour to create subversive propaganda, educating a willingly ignorant and fearful public. Best known for being one of the six people who designed the 1987 ‘Silence=Death’ poster, that little pink triangle that became an emblem of AIDS activism, his political art continues today with Flash Collective, an exercise that produces public art interventions by harnessing a group of individuals who inhabit any given space.

Days before the 50th anniversary of Stonewall, Finkelstein brought Good Trouble to an unassuming coffeehouse in Windsor Terrace where a long and bodacious conversation was had over what he considers the best grilled cheese in New York. Three decades since ‘Silence=Death’, and hundreds of thousands of self-published broadsheets later, his words on the matter of resistance are coloured with interdisciplinary wisdom. He communicates with the clarity of an academic, the creative timing of an artist and the unrelenting passion of an activist.

You are famous for your didactic one-liners. How has the role of wit changed in the digital age?

It is commonly understood that the assassination of Archduke Ferdinand (in 1914) was the event that set the entire 20th century in motion. We are living in that moment now. Everything that is happening right this very minute is going to predetermine every event that happens over the rest of the century. So we have to ask ourselves two questions: what are the ways in which the 21st century is different from every other century, and what are the ways it is the same?

We live in an image culture. We are forced into it. There is no way out of it. The image culture is based on images and texts, and the language of advertising is the folk language of capitalism. It’s snarky, drawing on derision, irony, insults and self-deprecation. All of the things that we in the past would describe as ‘ghetto humour’ – in my case, the Jewish ghetto. Jewish humour depends on self-deprecation. There are 100 words for how a person could be stupid in Yiddish. And that is true for a lot of communities that have a history of oppression: the ways in which we talk to ourselves are snarky. **If you want to reach an audience in late-stage capitalism, it’s impossible to do it without humour. Humour is one of the most powerful ways we have to speak to ourselves.**

When I walk around and see a barrage of rainbow flags, I find the show of commodification a bit nauseating – but the act is still technically a form of resistance?

In a ‘post-postmodern’ world, no one’s ever really understood what followed postmodernism. There have been a lot of half-hearted attempts to finger the AIDS crisis as the death of postmodernism – the idea that irony would be dead, that authorship couldn’t exist. Those are ideas that fly out the window when people are dying in hospital corridors. We haven’t exactly found a language for it in our culture yet, because we are actually in a period of transition. The thing we forget about our shared spaces is that the way that advertising works is by ubiquity. It is insistence and repetition that makes it function. What you are noticing is being power-washed by images of the rainbow flag, but every single act of resistance is as important as burning the Department of Treasury down.

Let’s talk about ‘Silence=Death’. Six people made that poster. It landed at the right moment when the AIDS movement gelled. It hit the streets of New York weeks before the first ACT UP meetings. But it was ACT UP activism and the people who responded to that poster made that poster what it is. We have it backwards. Activism and resistance is about individual agency. One person can make as much change as 10,000 people can make. It’s a different type of change. It’s incremental.

The reason why our broadsheet (*i.e. Good Trouble*) started was because people woke up the day after Trump was elected and their hair was on

fire. My phone was ringing off the hook. People asking “What do we do?” “How do we fix this?” “How do we make this stop?” – which are, from my perspective, really male questions. They are questions rooted in power, in the hegemonies that have always been there. Trump didn’t invent what’s wrong with Trump. The dissolution of the Voting Rights Act, reproductive rights for women, mass incarceration – these are things that have been going on for decades, or centuries, depending on which issue you are talking about.

I get the gesture. I do understand the impulse. But it’s the wrong question. The way you fix it is by being engaged and taking the next political step for yourself. Politicisation is an ongoing process. And even people who are hyper-political are learning things about their political environment every morning they wake up and encounter something. The idea that resistance leads to change and change is an endpoint and that endpoint is a discrete object is an idea based in capital. That isn’t how resistance works. Resistance is a string of gestures. It’s ongoing and never-ending. The same way that capital is a perpetual-motion machine, resistance needs to be a perpetual-motion machine.

Postmodern philosophy puts forth that multiple, contradictory truths exist simultaneously – but what if people are just addicted to simple stories?

We are force-fed all of these simple constructions. One of them is this idea of linearity, of the pendulum that swings from right to left. Progress is not actually a pendulum, it’s more like a spiral burrowing through something. That’s what culture is, that’s what engagement is, that’s what politics is, and that’s what resistance is. All part of this spiral, and the spiral goes from left to right, so in a way it’s part true. The pendulum is the checkers version of the 3D chess reality.

Every activist has decisions to make about the moment they are in. They can either participate or not. No one is free. Even white dudes have to consider the complexities of who they are in that moment. As activists – when we are terrified, exhausted, dejected or feel hopeless – we have to put our agency down in the ground and know that someone else will come along and pick it up. Resistance does not die. It is just handed from one group to another. We play the long game.

Tossing that someone will pick up where you left off – did you always have that in rat's trap, or did you have to learn that lesson?

The magic word that made me start paying attention to what we were saying to me (when we met) was ‘broadsheet’. I’ve handed out broadsheets at Pride, off and on, for three decades. Some of them have gotten me into so much trouble, I can’t even tell you! I’ve always done them with a small group of people, anywhere from a handful to two dozen. All made by collectives that run on the idea that every voice is essential so nothing is edited out. We cross-edit them. Multiple minds are always better than a single mind. This year, I’ve done 25,000 of that are being handed (out) on the subject of liberation, and I’ve learned some super-interesting things about

Queer people have always been hungry for information about ourselves because we’ve always been obliterated from the conversation. They might not even know it, but if you package it like swag, they will grab it out of your hands. To pass up on a million people grabbing things from you is insane, to not do a broadsheet every Pride. And throughout these conversations, I’ve learned about what worked, what didn’t.

Gran Fury used to go around with cameras and photograph the homophobic graffiti on our own work to help us assess what was working and what wasn’t. We did a poster about sexism with the Women’s Caucus that was about men using condoms. We put an erect penis on it and before the wheat paste was dried, the penis was torn off the wall. But the tagline – ‘Men: Use Condoms Or Beat It’ – is hilarious, so we just used the text. We did the text as stickers, as shopping bags, we recycled it at the Venice Biennale and juxtaposed it against a giant billboard about the pope and the Catholic Church. That one poster went on for years.

Let’s talk about Queer Liberation March, the alternative, anti-corporate event that occurs simultaneously with Pride.

It has existed since the very first Pride march – since the Heritage of Pride foundation decided to march through a consortium of queer business owners. Rather than marching out of the bars and into the streets, which was the original intent of gay liberation, they decided it would be better to march into the Village and into the street fair so people can buy funnel cakes. This debate has been going on forever. There have been radical ideas forever, but institutional power structures have no use for radical stories, which is why it is essential for us to have open spaces for counter-narratives.

This ties directly into your work with the Flash Collective, and the idea of creating temporary spaces of subversion.

The Flash Collective is a distillation of the permissions and structures that are found within an activist organisation. It’s a series of exercises that enable a group of strangers to go on the record and say what they want in a public space that day.

I’m convinced that if we got on the F train to Queens and asked everybody not to leave the car, we would have a shit-kicking series of (art)works. People want to hear their voices in public spaces – we are just told we can’t, or we lack the necessary skills. You’d be shocked how inventive, original and compelling every single person on the street is.

We are trained to think that we are irrelevant unless we are in the slipstream of late-stage capital, so part of the fear about the internet is about getting lost in it. The rapidity is an indication that you might not be seen, but guess what? Before we carried computers in our pockets, the same thing was true about the world.

So the fear is fundamentally the same, it just exists now on a virtual plane?

Throughout history, people have been force-fed reasons why they don’t matter by the hegemony that controls power: the church, capitalism, communism – every culture has versions of it. A group of people in a room has incredible, radical potential. We are just trained to not see and respond to it.

There’s a pretty obvious bout of nostalgia from people in my generation about the pre-internet world. It feels escapist in nature though.

The internet is not a communal space. It is not a space for conversation. If you are hungering for a conversation, do not go to the internet. Go to dinner with some friends, form a collective, a reading group, whatever you think you have to offer. The mistake we make is that the internet appears to be a community, but it isn’t. It’s a space for speaking, not a space for listening, and resistance can only happen with listening. Social spaces are interrupted by the internet’s declaration.

Unlike virtual spaces, liberation feels like a whole-body experience. Is part of your focus on liberation a reclaiming of the body?

We live in a world where the images of our commons are so different from what our commons really are. We think we know where we are because we have so much information, but in fact what

we are told about ourselves has nothing to do with what we feel about ourselves. We are doing everything completely backwards, yet we think we are super smart because we have the coolest phones in the world. Every single time you click on the terms and conditions without reading what they are, you are giving away your data, and we’ve been doing it for decades. So the idea that came up after Trump was elected, that you could fix whatever

enabled that to happen, is completely incorrect. It’s the wrong set of questions. Our love of techno-fixes is deranged. It really relates to the question of privilege. Privilege is a one-way mirror. If you are on the

privileged side, you think the world looks the way you see it, but if you are on the other side of that mirror, you know it’s glass. You know it’s an illusion. The further you are from privilege, the more you really can understand what’s happening.

The people who called me [that day] were mostly white. What Trump did was rip the bandage off of centuries of oppression that have been there since the beginning and have never been dealt with. We joined an international right-wing movement that has been going on for the last decade and a half. A lot of people thought it wasn’t possible because America has always been... you know, detached.

We’ve always been dreaming. Sleepwalking. Walking into walls. My philosophy professor once told me that it takes 200 years for philosophy to seep into public conscience. If we are now in Enlightenment-era thinking, what comes next? Existentialism?

We are in a radicalising moment. By that, I mean hegemony, harvesting. I don’t think that can be universally said about all of Europe – Europe has phased sets of self-realisations about colonialism and America has never addressed it.

If we are hearing the dying gasps of presumed neutrality of whiteness in America – and I believe that is what it is – then we are headed for a better world, the world I’ve been fighting my entire life to be in. And we are in a very painful period of transition.

But my people have lived through pain. I have seen terrible things. This is one of those moments. I am not going to candy-coat it. People will continue to suffer – it’s not over yet. But the cow is out of the barn on intersectional questions. There is no turning back on the fact that people of colour are going to be the majority in America. And we are going to be better for it. And the more women and people of colour in power, the better. And whatever privileges I have to cut, take ‘em! That’s how I feel about this moment. The world we are heading for is the world I want to live in.

avramfinkelstein.com | Portrait by the author | Posters courtesy of Avram Finkelstein

# SILENCE=DEATH

Why is Reagan silent about AIDS? What is really going on at the Center for Disease Control, the Federal Drug Administration, and the Vatican? Gays and lesbians are not expendable...Use your power...Vote...Boycott...Defend yourselves...Turn anger, fear, grief into action.

© 1987 AIDS Coalition To Unleash Power

# READ MY LIPS

**KISS IN**

Friday, April 29:  
9:00 pm **March from Christopher & West Sts.**  
10:00 pm **Rally at Sheraton Square**  
10:30 pm **Kiss In at 8th Avenue & 8th St.**  
11:30 pm **Tracks=ACT UP/ACT NOW Fundraiser**

**FIGHT HOMOPHOBIA: FIGHT AIDS**

**SPRING AIDS ACTION '88: Nine days of nationwide AIDS related actions & protests.**

*Gran Fury*

# POETIC JUSTICE

ART & TECH

From HIV infection rates to mass incarceration statistics, New York-based artist Ekene Ijeoma draws on data to create powerful installations that confront injustice while searching for solutions. He talked to Roderick Stanley



*Germ City: Microbes and the Metropolis* was a fascinating and enlightening recent show at the Museum of the City of New York that examined the history of the city’s battle with infectious disease – a fight that, in its words, involves “government, urban planners, medical professionals, businesses and activists”.

The relationship between people and pathogens has always had a cultural and political element in terms of what happens and to which communities. On display at the exhibition was a new sculpture called *Pan-African AIDS*, which explored the “hyper-visibility of the HIV/AIDS epidemic in Africa and the hidden one in black America”.

Between 2008 and 2015, while the rates of HIV/AIDS infections in Africa went down, the rates in the black population in the USA actually went up. A series of plexiglass panels transitioned between representations of the two populations at a rate exactly equivalent to the rise of infection in the US, sliced up into eight sections for each year.

Commissioned by the museum in partnership with London’s Wellcome Trust, the sculpture was the work of 35-year-old Ekene Ijeoma, a New York-based multidisciplinary artist and designer who uses technology and data to create powerfully affecting sculptures, installations, websites and performances. “The work I’m doing and the context of it is meant to be seen and discussed,” says Ijeoma, picking at a crossbones on the plate in front of him. Softly spoken and sometimes self-deprecating, he often offers a “maybe” or a “kind of” at the end of his lengthier discussions. When an idea takes him, though, he is forthright: “It’s not for sale. For me, it’s about getting the ideas and the issues out there through the work.”

For *Pan-African AIDS*, Ijeoma worked with an epidemiologist, researching academic reports about rates of infection in African countries where the fight against AIDS was funded, and in black populations in America where it wasn’t. “I just started making all these connections between race, health and inequality,” he says. “Men who have sex with men in Harlem, their rates are about the same as some of the countries with the highest HIV prevalence rates like South Africa.”

“It’s shocking, because we’re here in America... We’re supposed to be this first-world country... supposed to be the developed country. Yet you have populations here that are experiencing the same conditions as in so-called developing countries.”

Ijeoma grew up in Fort Worth, Texas. Both of his parents are business owners – his mother owns a salon, while his father runs a bookkeeping shop. He didn’t particularly enjoy Texas, specifically Fort Worth: “I mean, it wasn’t a place for me. I don’t have many thoughts about Texas. I left as soon as I could.”

He went to college at the Rochester Institute of Technology in New York state. “I thought it was closer to New York City than it is,” he laughs. (Narrator: it’s actually 350 miles away, near the Canadian border.) In high school he focused on art, but his parents didn’t want

him to go to art school. So he started taking design courses while continuing to make art. While studying “how to make banking apps”, he learned software programs like Processing, which enabled him to begin drawing with code. “I started using technology and it changed the way I thought about art. I was just making work. I still don’t know about the art world.”

Ijeoma is ambivalent about whether he is an artist or a designer. “I’m an artist who uses design to make work,” he shrugs. “Like, design is the tool. Art feels like the product.”

His first major project that came to people’s attention was *The Refugee Project*, an interactive map created in collaboration with Hyperakt design studio. “It showed, for the first time, every country affected by the refugee crisis,” he says. “We visualised the data but what it really was, for me, was changing the way we see an issue represented in the media.”

“Refugee migration was an issue mostly seen through photography – the photo of the Afghan girl in 1984. More recently, when the European refugee crisis started, you had the Syrian boy on the beach. But between those two photos, the media wasn’t really talking about refugee migration as an issue.”

When they did, it was always in relation to single countries, such as Syria. “But middle-eastern Africa had been experiencing some of the highest numbers of refugee migration consistently for decades. So it was to show more perspectives, to look outside the frames of photography that just focus on individuals and look at the larger system of the refugee crisis itself. It’s more than one girl in Afghanistan.”

On the one hand we are told people supposedly need simple stories and faces, otherwise they’re not able to impart information. On the other, we can see the dangers inherent in boiling everything down to personal narrative – the breathless palace intrigue surrounding Donald Trump and his court of corruption, or the endless political soap-opera surrounding Brexit, that drowns out almost all discussion of actual issues. Who’s in? Who’s out? It’s life and politics reduced to the banal stagings of a reality show.

“People need characters,” agrees Ijeoma. “You know, one of the criticisms of that work was that it was lacking in just that. And that’s fine! It was a pragmatic way of showing the issue – it needed to be done. The data for the refugee crisis had been collected for decades, it just wasn’t being visualised in the way we did.”

He talks about *Colors* magazine in the 90s, and its innovative visual reframing of the refugee crisis and AIDS. “Those things are still being represented in the same way, but nothing’s changing,” he says. “Does that mean this representation, was that working? Or was it not working?”

# HAIL SPECTRE! SUBVERTING THE CULT OF THE GOLDEN RULE

A sinister interactive installation called Spectre sheds light on the power of AI and ‘deep fake’ technology to create propaganda and undermine democracy. Are you ready to ‘pray at the altar of Dataism with the Gods of Silicon Valley’?

By Dr Mark Blacklock

At the centre of the gallery stand six black monoliths, two and a half metres high, facing inwards on a circular pedestal. Gallery visitors face each, with their backs to the centre of the circle, as if participating in a ritual. Set into each monolith is a screen.

Participants in the ritual are wired to the monoliths by headphones and a touchscreen controller through which they are invited to build a digital-influencing campaign by selecting which datasets they will use to target a population: credit scores, social media activity, web histories, each category exemplified of the data harvested from us all. The psychometric profiles of the people we want to target, their Ocean ratings, are provided, and we build an appropriate drag-and-drop ad targeted at this demographic. The reach is huge.

Finally, we select influencers to repeat our message. Kim Kardashian tells us: “When there’s so many haters, I really don’t care, because their data has made me rich beyond my wildest dreams.” Mark Zuckerberg declares: “*Spectre* showed me how to manipulate you into sharing intimate data about yourself and all your loved ones for free.” The artist Marina Abramovic informs us that she thinks about about every day. Each pays tribute to an organisation that enables the religion of Dataism to which they pledge allegiance: *Spectre* (named after the online persona of Dr Aleksandr Kogan, the data scientist who sold 87 million Facebook profiles to Cambridge Analytica).

The installation, shown for the first time at Sheffield Doc/Fest last summer, was created by artists Bill Posters, co-founder of Brandalism, and Dr Daniel Howe. Within days of its launch, its ‘deep fake’ avatar celebrity endorsement videos had gone viral, generating global media coverage. Posters fielded our questions. How did you select which celebs to create fakes of?

It is important to mention here that the ‘deep fake’ clips you are referring to are digital artworks that form part of the content of the *Spectre* installation. Myself and Daniel Howe wanted to reveal how powerful technologies can be used to influence our understandings and behaviours today and one of the technologies that we explore in *Spectre* is AI-synthesised video generation, commonly known as ‘deep fake’ technology. For *Spectre*, we wanted to ‘influence’ the ‘influencers’ that hold so much power today in the digital influence industry. We selected influencers from the past and present to create the AI-generated digital storytelling elements that have since gone viral on Instagram. We chose a range of influencers from the fields of art, technology and politics – the three broad fields that the *Spectre* project interrogates. We then simulated the way corporations generate interest in products by using our AI-generated ‘avatars’ as forms of celebrity endorsement online to generate interest, and it has been fascinating to see it spread virally online.

Is the software you used available?

The software our AI partners use to generate these pieces of moving-image art is not freely available. However, it is important to mention here that there are also no laws or regulatory controls for all of the forms of computational propaganda that *Spectre* explores: Ocean profiling, micro-targeting advertising and AI-generated video and text. Is this a shift of the subvertising tradition online?

For *Spectre*, we applied ‘detournement’ theory to subvert the methods and technologies that are commonly used by the digital influence industry to influence our perceptions and behaviours online. There have been many other projects that have created digital interventions as forms of culture jamming; however, we believe this is the first project to subvert the very technologies and psychological methods of the digital influence industry. We see this as the territory of the future, as it is clear that we can’t have a democracy without privacy and control of our personal data. The US election and UK Brexit referendum has shown us this very recently already, so we must interrogate the norms and cultures that exist at present in order to develop new ways of seeing the future.

How close to data analytics-based campaigns is the structure of the interactive section of the installation?

Why hasn’t it changed? If the issue hasn’t changed, why hasn’t representation changed to affect that? For me, using the means of today to make work about today is what I’m doing, and seeing technology as the way to do that.

“I’m embracing the space between facts and feelings. When I feel something, I want to be able to say it’s based on something. I don’t want to say: ‘Oh, I just woke up and I’m feeling this way. Which point do I want to use for this?’ You know, like I wake up and I’m feeling ‘this way’ about race in America.”

“Then we have to talk about why a lot of people thought we were living in a post-racial society. Why do they think it’s post-racial? Oh, it’s because they’re not experiencing the same discrimination. How can we communicate, create a visibility around this, so there’s accountability around the ‘Why am I feeling this way?’ That’s what it is.”

*Wage Islands* (2015) is a 3D map of New York City based on housing costs, submerged in a tank of dark blue water. As a viewer presses a button to increase the hourly wage, areas of the map slowly lift above water to show the parts of the city low-wage workers can afford to live in at that wage level. When the button is released, the wage reverts to legal minimum and the city sinks beneath the water.

*Wage Islands* was (created) when I was reaching towards more poetic ways of using data,” says Ijeoma. “I was using a geographical map of wagging, housing and inequality in New York City, but the locations weren’t as important as the fact that out of all the space in New York City, there just weren’t a lot of spaces that minimum-wage workers could afford to live.”

*Deconstructed Anthems* (2017) is an ongoing project, a series of music performances in which a self-playing piano and music ensemble deconstruct ‘The Star-Spangled Banner’, repeating it multiple times while removing notes at the rate of mass incarceration, ending in silence. A haunting performance at the Day for Night festival in Houston, Texas, included Emmy-winning pianist Kris Bowers, Blue Note trumpeter Ambrose Akinmusire and Grammy-nominated bassist Burniss Earl Travis.

The US imprisons more of its citizens than any other nation in the world. The jail population has exploded from less than 200,000 in 1972 to a scarcely comprehensible 2.2 million today, and it’s an issue that, like so many things in America, disproportionately affects people of colour. The statistics are shocking: one of every three black boys born in the USA today can expect to go to prison in his lifetime, as can one of every six Latino boys, compared with just one of every 17 white boys, according to the ACLU.

Ijeoma knew he wanted to use the national anthem to speak to the history of black people in America. At first, he was focused on historic centres of black wealth (known as ‘black Wall Streets’) at the turn of the 20th century. Greenwood, Tulsa, had one of the biggest concentrations of African-American businesses in the US until 1921, when white residents rioted, massacred hundreds of black residents and burned the entire neighbourhood to the ground.

The idea was to look at overall disenfranchisement and divestment in the black populations since 1900,” he says. “I had been talking to the Vera Institute of Justice, who have one of the most comprehensive, I think, collections of data on mass incarceration in the nation.”

During the performance, as the notes slowly disappear from the anthem, it’s a powerful metaphor for a national identity decaying from the inside out, with parts of its collective identity literally disappearing over time – the people that should make the country what it is: “Juxtaposing something that is supposed to represent the American dream with something that’s the opposite of it,” he adds. “In a lot of ways, that’s the black experience in the US. Especially in relation to mass incarceration... We’re supposed to keep believing that we’re living the dream but we’re not. Yet we still have to sing the same song.”

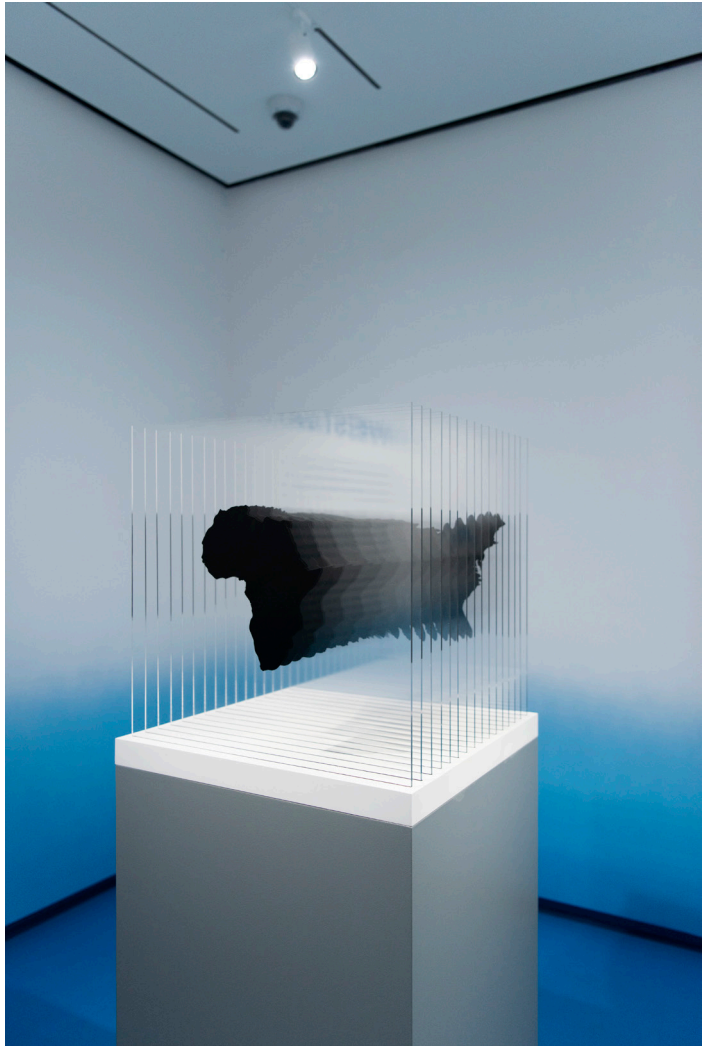
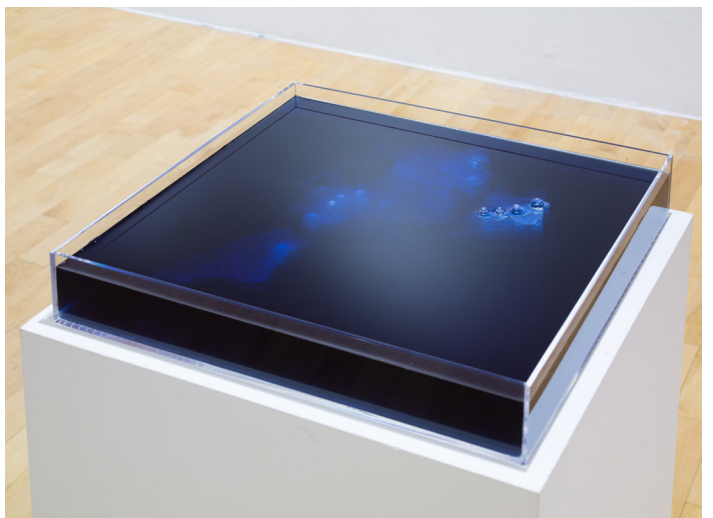
The piece was performed at the Kennedy Center in DC in a shortened version, and Ijeoma explains how he created custom software to compose the music and remove the notes. “I worked at the national level,” he says, referring to the data it draws from. “but I can also focus on a city or a state, and change the composition based on where it’s being performed.”

He could see it in the future being adapted for a symphony orchestra, or perhaps a gospel choir. But jazz is all about finding freedom amid constraints, which is why he found it such a powerful way of exploring this idea: “The story of jazz is the story of black people navigating systems in the US.”

In 2019, Ijeoma became founder and director of Poetic Justice at MIT Media Lab, a group that sets out to merge different creative disciplines to create “art representations and interventions for problem-finding and solution-finding”.

“It’s just me taking everything I’ve been developing over the last five years and expanding that through their facilities and resources.” Ijeoma says. “Firstly, it’s one of the first art groups at MIT Media Lab. Secondly, it’s about the third social justice group there, out of 25 labs. And I think there’s been maybe one other black male that’s ever done it.”

“We’ve had all the facts. People have been presented all the facts and no one is acting on facts. So, what we’re doing with our work is – everything’s based on facts, but we’re trying to translate that into an informed feeling. How can you meet people where they’re at?” The embodiment has to be different. That’s what we’re exploring.”



Ijeoma says he was overwhelmed by the amount of applications he received, but also their generosity: “People really share a lot. It’s difficult because I want to be able to support all this work, but I have to focus on this idea that I’m trying to create with Poetic Justice. We’re not just making work about social justice. We’re trying to speak to social justice with poetry... Not literature but, how can we say this in the most poetic way? How can you find a medium for the message? Because not everything can be a website. Not everything can be a sculpture.”

“We’ve had all the facts. People have been presented all the facts and no one is acting on facts. So, what we’re doing with our work is – everything’s based on facts, but we’re trying to translate that into an informed feeling. How can you meet people where they’re at?” The embodiment has to be different. That’s what we’re exploring.”

studioijeoma.com

# BRANDALISM

**ZUCKERBERG: WE'RE INCREASING TRANSPARENCY ON ADS ANNOUNCES NEW MEASURES TO "PROTECT ELECTIONS"**

*Spectre* contains a re-creation of aspects of Cambridge Analytica’s ROP software that was used to great effect in the US elections in 2016. We worked with data scientists and psychometricians from the Psychometrics Centre at Cambridge University to build what is essentially a ‘dark ad’ generator: a design tool that contains 40 different political campaign themes linked to high and low Ocean personality profile traits, that allows visitors to construct targeted Facebook ads using the same methods made visible by the Cambridge Analytica scandal and what is now a huge burgeoning influence industry.

What steps do you personally take to protect your data online?

While it is almost impossible to have any privacy at all if you use any laptop or mobile device, I am an open source advocate and use a variety of free plugins and tools to protect my personal data online as best as I can. There are some amazing organisations and individuals that have created really interesting tools that are free to use. For online surveillance of my browsing activities I use a plugin for Firefox called Ghostery, and HTTPS Everywhere alongside Privacy Badger – a great new browser plugin. For online searching, I use DuckDuckGo, which blocks many advertising trackers and doesn’t provide Google (the founder of surveillance capitalism) with more of your private data. For mobile devices, I turn off data and location services for apps; however, the reality is that if you own one, you have no privacy. We just need an informed awareness of just how much information we give away about ourselves every day so we can decide what we are willing to trade for convenience.

brandalism.ch



# THE PROBLEM WITH TASTEFULNESS

‘Rules of taste appear as a means of control.’ Read an extract from the incisive, angry and brilliant new book *Steal as Much as You Can*, by Nathalie Olah

Kathy Acker once wrote that Andy Warhol had made it OK to be queer. She was referring of course to the fact that Warhol’s work shocked, thereby challenging existing rules of taste and allowing the trans, gay and bi people he called his friends not just to feel accepted but to have a greater degree of agency in shaping mainstream culture and the collective values of a generation. I don’t particularly like Warhol or his legacy of exploiting people to further his own celebrity, but I include his example to highlight the fact that he made cultural inroads by virtue of being controversial. He didn’t transform Western culture by writing something in the vein of so many of today’s pop-feminist or similar political ‘manifestos’, explaining in jocular, broadsheet-friendly terms the finer details of his friends’ amphetamine addictions and sex lives for the purposes of appeasing the middle classes. But, with the exception of a rare few outliers, such as writer Reni Eddo-Lodge, whose polemic *Why I’m No Longer Talking to White People About Race* made one of the rare, direct and unapologetic affronts to the mainstream establishment in recent years, as well as Jordan Peele, whose films, including *Get Out*, have achieved similar gains within the movie industry, this is precisely what even our most experimental culture looks like today, feeding middle-class caricatures of a youth culture, as well as a plethora of social issues, that few on the ground actually recognise. The mainstream media can wield any number of works detailing the experiences of trans people, for example, as proof of its progressive and inclusive agenda, but where has the anger gone? The rage and the despair? Where are the Derek Jarmans? The Leigh Bowerys? The Grace Joneses? Where are the artists like Keith Flint and Tricky, who crept onto our TV screens and terrorised our mums? Against everything, these artists made inroads into pop culture, shaping and expanding the horizons of the British public. Where is even our equivalent of George Michael – a popstar whose provocations to the homophobic entertainment industry and media, and the political statements that he made during TV interviews, seem strangely unthinkable to us in the current climate? In the pervasive and ever more limited rules of tastefulness that now reign supreme, even these once celebrated attendants of pop culture would not be permitted – and it is this that is increasingly contributing to the internet, for good or bad, becoming the real terrain of today’s culture wars, rather than the tired establishment routes whose tyrannical constraints prevent anything meaningful and authentic from ever being expressed.

Broadly speaking, though not in all cases, these challengers to the mainstream also hailed from low-income backgrounds. As I’ve argued elsewhere, the elitist risk-aversion that set in post-2008 has therefore not only created a cultural climate that is unrepresentative, but by eliminating working-class vernacular art and storytelling – made vivid by its struggle and its urgency – also created a cultural climate of the most prosaic and unremarkable kind. Identity politics have played an important role in recent years in helping millions of people live a more complete, honest and truthful life, and allowed many more people than ever before to feel more accepted by society. But any effort to promote greater inclusivity that neglects to consider how race, gender, sexuality and disability intersect with class, is incomplete. For most people, the prejudices faced on

account of any factor of identity will be intimately connected with the poor conditions they face at work, their interactions with customers when working in the hospitality industry, for example, and their reliance on bureaucratic systems that the middle classes are able to buy their way out of. Therefore, any effort to mainstream a more inclusive attitude towards any one of these factors of identity must also require us to consider them through this socioeconomic lens.

The type of sponsored event championing various issues of identity politics that we’ve seen explode in recent years – usually hosted in the exhibition halls of Somerset House and attended by a core strain of magazine and PR person living in London – sadly won’t achieve this, and only constitutes a complex version of the dreaded advertorial, or similar. What’s more, it has seemed at times over the past decade that the liberal media has relied on these fairly facile gestures to preserve its progressive credentials, while crucially failing to address the mounting class struggle that has been taking place all around it; often amplifying the voices of influencers championing single-issue identity causes, while neglecting to document the anger of working-class people of all races, genders and sexual persuasions up and down the country, and neglecting to acknowledge its own part in a deeply classist society.

As the media pulls further and further away from the lived experience of working people, and class becomes increasingly denied, its rules of taste also start to appear more vividly as a means of control. This is my main reason for challenging the increasingly tepid and predictable output of our cultural institutions, and for sometimes championing work that offends the sensibilities of its middle-class gatekeepers – not because I necessarily have a vested interest in the work itself, but because any challenge to an all-pervasive and seemingly inescapable neoliberal system depends on the right for challengers to exist. What (Angela) Nagle has characterised as ‘transgressive’ art and culture in *Kill All Normies* – thereby implying that it is also gratuitous – actually serves an invaluable role in creating a more critical and responsive society. That’s because mainstream cultural output that shocks, scares, challenges and surprises us also forces us to participate, and forces us to look inward and reflect on the emotional responses it creates. It works in the opposite way of the very easily digestible culture promulgated by today’s gatekeepers, and creates a climate in which we all become more alert and critical in our political judgements. I could read as much theory and commentary on race relations in western culture as I wanted and still not experience the palpable embarrassment I did from watching five minutes of *Get Out*. Such work is necessary for making all of us more cognisant to any strain of cultural bigotry and oppression, but it is particularly important for remaining aware of the many quiet and subtle ways in which neoliberal politics shapes our daily lives and perpetuates a polite oppression. In this sense, we need horror and transgression not only to allow for the expression of rage and anger that many of us rightly feel, and not just to allow for satirical output capable of skewering the incumbent elite, but to keep all of us more alert to the hypocrisy of respectable politics and culture, whose mild-mannered delivery has for too long sought to distract us from the violence of structural inequality that is contains and conceals.

Tastefulness is also highly rigged and hypocritical. After all, an aristocrat’s son wearing a tracksuit remains an aristocrat’s son, while a wealthy footballer driving a Lamborghini that he has chosen to paint in camo will forever be excluded and derided by the establishment. In this unilateral arrangement, the middle and upper classes are free to mine working-class culture for whatever purposes they like – freely switching between the signifiers of their class to whatever sportswear is approved by Hypebeast – while their working-class peers are ordered to conform to a narrow set of good taste principles defined by the establishment in order to be accepted and approved. This is something like an inversion of the ‘code-switching’ phenomenon referred to by US congresswoman Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez in an April 2019 Twitter thread, following a claim made by President Trump that her ability to switch vernacular depending on audience group constituted a lack of political integrity and authenticity. Ocasio-Cortez hit back, arguing that the necessity for ethnic minority and working-class people to develop secondary speech patterns in order to succeed at work amounted to one of the most pervasive and unchallenged forms of xenophobia and class bias in America. It also lent a poignancy to her previous endorsement of US rapper Cardi B, famous among other things for the unapologetic use of her Trinidadian/Dominican-by-way-of-the-Bronx accent, and whose meteoric rise to fame constitutes one of the most vivid and hopeful symbols of working-class participation in mainstream culture of recent years. When used in reverse – that is, when the rich cosplay as the working class – it functions in much the same way as the ‘cool-hunting’ phenomenon outlined previously, erasing and thereby negating the working-class experience.

Think of its core tenets too, and it becomes obvious how far tastefulness is used as a way of modulating and silencing cultures that diverge from the status quo. Good taste is often defined as being understated, inoffensive, muted and calm. On the flip side of this, young inheritors of the white middle class seeking to lay claim to something cool and edgy are increasingly drawn to aspects of working-class culture that they judge to be gauche, exciting and strange. This takes us back to the resurgence in terrace culture mentioned previously and its concentration in recent years among affluent, privately-educated people, particularly those working in fashion, who show little regard for how this fetishisation only makes class divisions more entrenched, by further pushing the working-class experience into the realm of morbid spectacle.

Similarly, we see on the pages of magazines aspects of the working-class experience used to sell fashion – Balenciaga jackets shot against council-estate backdrops in an assertion by its mostly white, mostly middle-class authors, including photographers, stylists and editorial staff, of the inferiority of this social milieu; an ironic juxtaposition that could not exist were all those involved not signatories to the belief that the cultural background against which it set constitutes something disgusting.

I first encountered this flagrant and semi-ironic use of class interplay when, in an effort to vindicate my working-class parents who’d been denied the opportunity for further education themselves, and in the somewhat vain hope of improving conditions for

all of us, I found myself in the halls of Oxford as an 18-year-old student.

With the exception of a few good friends, most of whom came from working-class state-school backgrounds and found themselves feeling equally isolated and confused, the experience was unsettling and fairly disruptive to my overall wellbeing. In addition to there being widespread and unchecked misogyny, classism and bigotry of almost every possible variety, Oxford was also one the most culturally barren places I have ever encountered. For the privately educated, university seemed less an exercise in wanting to genuinely understand the world around them and more an endless game of debate and one-upmanship, where the final goal wasn’t to establish truths or to find solutions to any given problem, but to simply win. In this game, reading materials were no longer entry points or ways of thinking about a given subject, but provided a stock of quotations used as collateral in arguments whose basis never extended beyond the person’s own biases and judgments. Rewards were given to those who spoke most persuasively, who had the greatest command and confidence in their delivery, and who, I realised, were able to most successfully mimic the styles that were peddled in the House of Commons and, increasingly, the mainstream media.

In many ways, what I encountered at Oxford seemed to flout every convention of the academic or scientific approach as I had understood it. What I witnessed instead were young people learning ways to justify their biases and confound anyone who challenged them through equivocation and an arsenal of quotations. This created the grounds on which most privately-educated people who I met there seemed to believe that the purpose of university was simply to hone and refine their all-powerful minds, rather than putting those minds to work in the service of some greater cause or purpose. It was a place where everything had been stripped of greater meaning, beyond serving as collateral in the arguments that were being formulated by these precocious young graduates of abject privilege. If culture is the expression of a collective identity and of a shared sense of belonging, then it was little surprise that, in this hub of individualism, where the power of ego reigned supreme, culture was almost nowhere to be found.

Blur bassist Alex James’s cheese festival might serve as an extreme example of the twice approximation of what most middle-class people in Britain now understand to mean culture, but aren’t most festivals really just a variation on Alex James’s cheese festival, insofar as they are largely the preserve of a white establishment so devoid of any essential connection to a wider community or collective identity, that the only means it seems to have found for self-expression is dowsing its face in glitter? This, I might add, was the preferred pastime of most people I encountered during my three fairly difficult years at Oxford.

And yet, those accusing the over-tanned, Aaliyah-impersonating or bindi-toting Home Counties transplants to Glastonbury or Notting Hill Carnival every year of using their culture as a costume, might be good enough to remember that these are the hapless orphans of a culture that has long since departed – smiling polaroid avatars, swirling forever on a sea of pastiche.

Steal as Much as You Can by Nathalie Olah is published by Repeater Books, 2019

# WAR GAMES

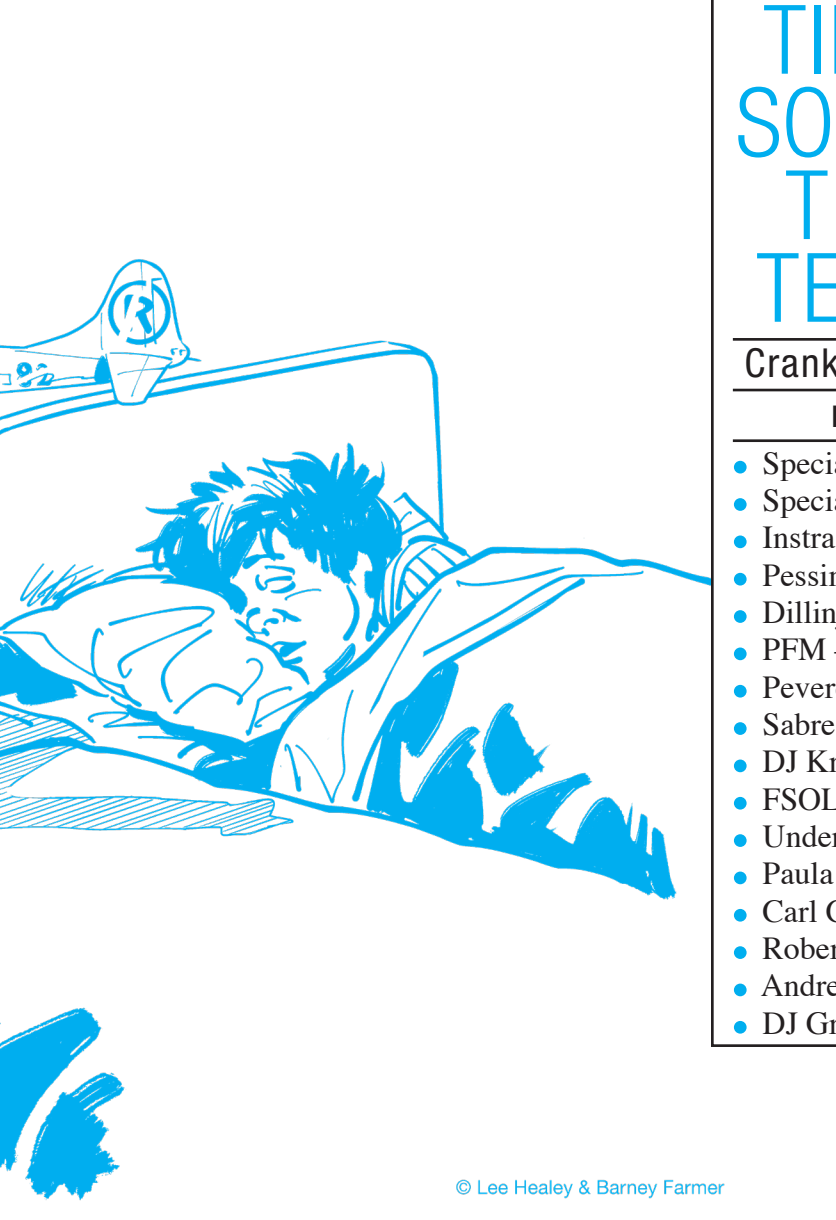
Nostalgia isn’t what it used to be, writes Drunken Bakers author Barney Farmer, along with a short extract from his new book *Coketown*

Nostalgia. Ain’t what it used to be. The old jokes are the best, they tell me. Of course, hordes hold the old everything best today. And right now their past shapes your future, I’d say. So as with all gags old or new, the line at the kernel is true. Obviously. Nothing is fixed in a world defined by change. Nostalgia, once no more than a benign manifestation of failing agency, a natural facet of the ageing process – often endearing, periodically alarming, but inevitable and in any case harmless – has become a dynamic political force of our time (and obsession of mine). Britain and the United States are now countries for old men, by old men. US politics from the outside looks like a geriatric Island of Dr Moreau. The turtle man. Of course, men are at present the worst, we trade our whole lives on coming first, so fading powers hits us hardest, not simply we’re the merdest. But that’s just this generation. As more women in the vanguard of emancipation come of age they’ll become just as big a threat. Nobody is immune. Mass longevity has consequences. We are time capsules. Warm vessels of experience. Animated archives of life as lived. And we stopped dying. Stopped being buried, started sticking around. Now capsules overdue for underground are open and on the march. What do we want? To live in the past. When do we want it? Then. Not the actual past. Nostalgia is autobiographical, tribal, tells little of the actual shared past and everything of those telling. Not the past, just one passing. Naturally, every shade of political opinion packs its share of heads – mostly men – harking back to something, somewhere, then. We’re all at it, me an’ all. All indulge in historic veneration, sole variant the Paradise Lost under adoration. In Britain, for instance, many middle-to-late-middle-aged power-brokers and political figures of the nineties and noughties have long cherished the opening ceremony of the 2012 London Olympic Games as a modern high watermark, a concrete representation of a happy and contented nation at ease with itself, its heritage, its diversification. Each July 27, they duly appear on social media to wistfully romanticise that distant evening’s superbly crafted and briefly entertaining theatrical emcee as though it were a thing of great substance and significance, far more than a mere diverting hour and a bit, far more than the mere sum of its parts. A national ‘moment’ perceived and shared and understood alive in the hearts of the tens of thousands in the stadium and, say, the tens of thousands of children watching that night – if they were able or could be arsed – in temporary accommodation. The latest official exit figure, by the way, being 124,490. Not grazed Year Zero Olympics seats, that a mere 62k, no, kids in insecure digs, right now, today, near you. They muse upon when and where and how things all came to go so, so wrong when only so recently they were so right, on that star-spangled night in the capital. All this despite the fact post-crash Britain beyond those walls was well on its way through the floor, a busy far right already seeking out discontent, misdirecting anger, stacking up the firewood, geed on by the nostalgist bible of the *Daily Mail* and other lesser though equally zealous press apostles. Which of course is how by far the largest and so most influential body of power nostalgia is conservative to its core. Because older people buy most newspapers and nostalgia is age-related and conservatives are old, they’re just old, even the young one or two are old. Sorry if that sounds a little cold, but some things are best told bald. Their nostalgia is a right-wing values package (cut to re-recorded rock’n’roll compilations as sold in garden centres and petrol stations). It’s a big no to mass trade union membership for example. But yes backstreet abortion and execution, random sample. The war inevitably looms largest, rendering the red white and black monolith shaping our destiny. This used to annoy me until I realised we have no choice. Only from our tiny chronological perspective is the largest single sequence of events in all recorded human history distant. If that history were represented with a metre rule, and the war an axe chop along that line, we’d see we are still scrambling up the cut. The epoch-ending seismic geopolitical shifts and sheer depth of abandon to the brutal truth of our worst nature casts a long shadow, who knew? The horror is a few breaths behind us, and nothing remotely so significant has happened since, the Beatles aside. Escape is a possibility not an option to take or let go, a prospect on the horizon, a realistic expectation, plausible aspiration, gift only time can withhold or bestow. How much time? We don’t know. Safe to say with conviction though, that our wider culture is yet to show any real desire to escape said shadow. Pick up a TV guide. An old one will do, or brand-new. Or don’t bother because you already know what I’m about to say, maybe noticed it yourself one day, flicking idly through the shite, I thought. Nah, that can’t be right... Then went over to cover and knew, that in TV land the war is 365. It has been so long as you’ve been alive. Always a presence, a film, or two, a sitcom, a documentary, a thing. Every day, and on certain dates each year, and the weeks leading there to, a centre of attention, a dominant presence erected, to which one’s attention is strongly directed. Names and dates, heroes and villains, victories and defeats, have become matters liturgical in Conservative nostalgia, sacrament to test and confirm the faithful, cause everyone else neuralgia. Some few among the most devout subliminally re-enact the war via Martin Scorsese from the European Union. Some subliminal. As many liminal. Leading figures, big platforms and voices, playing war heavy, bining comparison between their own antics in studio and debating chamber, and the despairing ordeal of a continent six years under the yoke, threat of imminent brutal death a daily fact of life. Now mostly dead, copyright on their past misdeeds expired, their sacrifice and sorrow skinned and worn as attire by the ‘we who somehow acquired the rights from Facebook and *The Sun*. ‘We’ not ‘they’.

The new prime minister is a high priest of this faith, a possibly tribute prophet fashioned after the great bulldog of the war, but never he publicly likened himself, a bulldog bulwark between We and an EU, while nursing Hitler’s goal, gleefully dishing out punishment beatings as rotte. Break out the ‘Keep Calm and Carry On’ mugs. Had precisely none of this in mind when set to write *Coketown*, but sharpish became obvious no effort concerned with late-middle-aged English masculinity could avoid it. The louder the bang the longer the reverberation, and men like me, and the people in the book, and you, are children of the echo. And decades of us to come.

## FROM COKETOWN, BY BARNEY FARMER

Why might a nimble child – Spring-heeled Jack at that age, a writhing eel on the line, a flare-clad faun – begin limping in the first place? This I know. Overheated imagination meet culture. Specifically telly. Raised by the box. Specifically films. Specifically the old war films. Obsessed. Saw all the old war films. Played all the old war films. Wasteland behind the street, me, our kid, all the lads from around, diving behind bushes, mouths making machine guns. Lived all the old war films. Always a limper sooner or later in the old war films, usually the cool defiant one. The grunt with the begrudging salute. Slug in the leg? Undaunted. Bite down, on, have a cig, limp, fight, kill, limp, smoke, limp, soldier on, foil-pack, leave me, save yourselves, a last stand, a last gasp, limp and smoke to victory or glorious death. Obviously am a smoker too. Wall-to-wall that war back then. Never the first war, always the second. Toys and games were that war, comics were that war, half the TV shows were that war, afternoon matinees were that war. There was a massive u-bat on the seaboard throughout childhood, a plastic sea wolf looming over the ornaments, the errant Capo di Monte rose and brass Basses bound, jubilee mug and Shire horse. Sections cut away to betray inner workings and pea-sized sub-aqua Nazis scurrying the exposed passages. The u-bat not the Shire horse. Pride of place until it fell apart from being ragged by me. The u-bat not the Shire horse. Our kid was Airfix mad, countless were, and little did more to keep the war physically alive in the British psyche than these accurate scale renderings of the engines of that war. For the ten years we shared a bedroom I awoke with a B-29 Superfortress turning out of a bombing run four feet above my face. How many Spitfires and Hurricanes and Me109s and Heinkel He 111s frozen mid-dogfight over how many boys in their beds, half-awake and dreaming, confused and masturbating. Airfix stormtroopers posed a carpet treading risk to rival Lego. Every home had the lad flinging a stick-grenade loaded in paint, poised to blitzkrieg sensitive stockinged insteps. *Coketown* is published by Wrecking Ball Press



© Lee Healey & Barney Farmer

# INFINITE DETAIL

If the web collapses, what happens to us? Tim Maughan’s debut novel *Infinite Detail* paints a chilling future world of post-technological breakdown, threaded with hope, humanity, rebel radio and bass-heavy beats. But science-fiction isn’t really about the future – it’s about the present day, he explains to Roderick Stanley via neural link



Journalist-author Tim Maughan’s debut novel, *Infinite Detail*, is a thrilling, nightmarish portrayal of a near-future world reliant on the internet for almost everything, and what happens when the whole surveillance-capitalist shishow comes crashing down: social collapse, creeping authoritarianism and an increasingly embattled resistance. Sound familiar? It should – as he explains, science-fiction “isn’t really about the future, it’s about the present.” What makes Maughan’s techocalypse so compelling is not just his command of technological detail, but the glimmer of salvation – one of community and deep personal relationships, drawn from his passion for underground electronic music and rave culture of the last few decades. Set in a fictionalised near-future (though very 90s-esque) Stokes Croft in Bristol, England, certain scenes in his book posit a return to humanity in that euphoric, edge-of-civilisation sense of unity that comes from catching a vibe with a similarly minded crowd in front of a good old ribcage-rattling sound system. Good Trouble opened up a neural link to Ottawa, Canada, where the British author now lives, and pestered him with some questions.

I think we’re of a roughly similar generation and I sometimes think about how our generation is fairly unique in that we were able to experience both the early utopian promise of the worldwide web, as well as today’s surveillance-capitalist nightmare. In this respect, I enjoyed how your book looks both forward and backward – to a near-future dystopia, as well as nostalgia for a recent ‘past future’. How much did that unique generational viewpoint on technology and society inform this novel? That generational perspective was important in forming the book, certainly. The work of the late critic and theorist Mark Fisher was at the forefront of my mind when I was writing it – as it often is. He wrote about ‘hauntology’, which he described as a nostalgia not so much for the past, but for lost futures and possibilities. Usually he was describing art and music, and it was something I wanted to confront head-on in the book, in a kind of introspective way. I realised that makes up a lot of my perspective on the world – that I’m always referring back to my formative years growing up in the 80s and especially the 90s, not with a desire to go back there, but with a sadness that the political and cultural futures we could see emerging were denied us by neoliberal capitalism. And now, of course, it increasingly feels like it’s going to deny us any future.

On Twitter, followers often bring to your attention aspects of the modern world that are #Infinite-Detail. What’s it like observing your book come to life in this way? It’s odd. It’s both rewarding and dismaying. Rewarding because it’s nice to see that readers are engaging with the book and its themes, dismaying because – well, it’s such a reminder that everything is fucked. Plus it’s an old refrain but it’s true: science-fiction isn’t really about the future, it’s about the present. I’m still not sure if *Infinite Detail* is really science-fiction, but if it is, its aim was always to engage very directly with the present, so it’s less about watching the book come to life – that life was already there, it’s more about whether the book did a good job of capturing it. Your portrayal of the collapse of the internet chillingly brings to life how much we depend on it. Recent books like Douglas Rushkoff’s *Team Human* and Shoshana Zuboff’s *Age of Surveillance Capitalism* argue that urgent resistance against this aggressive new form of capitalist power is required. As we move further and further into a networked world run by barely accountable corporations, what do you see as the most effective form of popular resistance on this front? Or is the toothpaste out of the tube?

## TIM MAUGHAN’S SOUNDTRACK FOR THE UPCOMING TECHPOCALYPSE

Crank up the bass and play loud while reading the interview above

- Special Request – ‘Soundboy Killer’
- Special Request – ‘Capsules’
- Instrumental – ‘No Future (Original Mix)’
- Pessimist – ‘Grit’
- Dillinja – ‘The Angels Fell’
- PFM – ‘The Western (Mike’s Ricochet Mix)’
- Peeverlist – ‘Roll With the Punches’
- Sabres of Paradise – ‘Flight Path Estate’
- DJ Krust – ‘Warhead (Steppa Mix)’
- FSOL – ‘You’re Creeping Me Out’
- Underground Resistance – ‘Kill My Radio Station’
- Paula Temple – ‘Colonized’
- Carl Craig – ‘Red Lights’
- Robert Hood – ‘Sleep Cycle’
- Andrea Parker – ‘Angular Art’
- DJ Grand Wizard Theodore – ‘Subway Theme’

It’s a really good and tough question, and one I consciously tried to avoid answering in the book. I didn’t want it to be a manifesto or a blueprint for protesting – although hints at those things are in there, as well as critiques of them. As I was writing the book, I came across this great essay by Astra Taylor (1) where she makes a distinction between activism and organising. The argument she’s making is there’s a lot of talk about activism these days, but it tends to be short-term, something you can say you did by liking a post on Facebook. Actual political change is done through organising, and that’s a much longer process, but often on a much smaller, local scale. It starts at a community level, and involves a lot of planning and dedicating a large chunk of your life to a political cause. Hong Kong protesters have been using lasers to try and disrupt facial recognition tech, as well as employing AiDrop to disperse messages directly within their network – a bit like in your fictional decentralised network. What does the future of protest look like to you? The images out of Hong Kong have been both terrifying and hugely inspiring. But part of me is always pulled back to Gil Scott-Heron and his famous line “The revolution will not be televised!” – I’m not sure how much people really understand what he meant by that. He was basically saying you won’t be able to stay home and watch the revolution, not only because it’ll be happening to you, but also that it will be against television itself. **TV, in its current form at least, will have to be destroyed. And protests become part more content for TV and social media.** We have to be sure revolutions aren’t just more filler content for advertising networks, that we aren’t just the spaces between ads. Your work as a journalist has clearly informed your creations as a writer, so could you explain how your fiction and non-fiction complement each other? Back in 2014, I was invited on a trip to China by Unknown Fields, a team of speculative architects based out of London. Starting with a week onboard a huge container ship, over three weeks we tramped back up the supply chain for consumer goods from China, stopping at factories and markets along the way, until we ended up at the rare-earth mines of inner Mongolia. We wanted to follow the path – in reverse – that a lot of our everyday items take to get to us, right back to the point where the raw materials are dug out of the ground. They originally asked me to come along in a fiction-writing role, to help them make short speculative films based on what they’d seen. I wasn’t even working seriously as a journalist at that point. But when I got back, I wrote it up as a series of articles for the BBC. Suddenly I was a ‘real’ journalist – I even won an award. Which was all great, and it felt good to get what I had seen over to a wider audience – to give people a glimpse into this usually hidden world we all rely upon. But, for me personally, it wasn’t enough. As satisfying as it was on one level, doing this kind of journalism felt limiting. I’d been deeply affected by what I’d seen on the trip, by the human cost of manufacturing, the vast automated infrastructure, the terrible ecological damage. And journalism, with its need to appear to be factual and objective, simply didn’t allow me to express my emotionality. So I started writing fiction about it. I wrote a couple of stories set inside factories I’d visited, one given a slightly speculative twist, the other not at all. Both of them felt incredibly dystopian, even though neither of them diverged from reality in any major way. It was an eye-opening experience for me, a career-defining moment in a way. I realised this was what I wanted to do. If, like I mentioned earlier, science-fiction was only really useful for talking about the now, and at the same time journalism wasn’t equipped to fully describe the present, then I was going to use science fiction as a way of augmenting my journalism. Your passion for underground electronic music, jungle, techno, sound system culture and so on also shines through in your book, and it sometimes reads like an elegy for a ‘lost’ youth culture. What aspects of that culture do you think are lacking today? Yeah, there’s definitely a nostalgia, like I mentioned, for the lost political opportunities and possibilities, different ways of life, that the rave scene presented us with. I think [the parties] were fiercely political just by being a rejection of the toxic mix of free-market corporatism, privatisation of public spaces and social conservatism that Thatcher used to destroy UK society in the 1980s. There’s actually a fantastic documentary by Jeremy Deller (2) that sums this up much better than I could. It’s well worth a watch. I sobbed through the whole thing – it was both enthralling and hugely sad. Speaking generally, what role do you think culture should play in protest and activism in coming years? I think art has an essential role in protest, but like I said earlier in reference to Astra Taylor’s work, it’s important we don’t get distracted by thinking it’s the full answer, or that we’ve contributed something just by making or consuming art. I often get asked if I consider myself an activist – I don’t, and I’m always suspicious of any artist that claims their art is their activism. It’s a starting point, not the full process. I’d like to believe art can change the world, and I truly think it can on occasion, but perhaps the best it can do is to save our humanity – to help us make the best moral and aesthetic decisions in the face of adversity and oppression. And to help us to look around and ask the right questions – I think perhaps that’s art’s most important and useful role in 2019 and looking forward.

(1) *Against Activism*, by Astra Taylor – *The Baffler*, Issue 30 *thebaffler.com/salvagingactivism*  
(2) *Everybody in the Place*, by Jeremy Deller – *BBC*, available online



# MAKE SOME FUCKIN' NOISE: SPIRAL TRIBE

Spiral Tribe were one of the most notorious travelling free-party sound systems of the 90s. Artist Seana Gavin talks to Roderick Stanley about her recent exhibition of unseen photos, flyers and ephemera that examined its legacy



*Spiral Baby* was an exhibition inspired by the legacy of Spiral Tribe, a notorious sound system collective that formed in 1990 and influenced a decade of culture and parties. Seana Gavin, a London-based artist, was involved in the free-party and rave scene from 1993 to 2003, and spent years crisscrossing Europe with friends in mobile homes, traveling in convoy with the sound systems and attending multi-day 'tek'nivals' in France, Spain, Holland, Czechoslovakia, Berlin and Hungary.

It was a brave and rugged alternative way of life – a modern-day tribe creating temporary communities in the gaps of contemporary society, a nomadic youth nation united by the pounding kick drum of hardcore techno. Good Trouble spoke to Gavin about why she felt the time was now right to show these photos, flyers and diary entries, and what a younger generation might learn from these pioneering hedonists.

What was it that first attracted you to this scene?

I was underage when I started going to London squat parties in 1993. I regularly attended a club on Old Street called Whirl-Y-Gig. The night would finish early at midnight so a group of friends started taking me along to raves afterwards. The majority of my mates at the time lived in squats and were all into an alternative lifestyle. I was immediately hooked and it became my weekend ritual and very quickly my life started to evolve around the 24-hour party life. I became friends with a lot of the sound systems that put on the events.

I think what attracted me to this scene was the freedom – it was something outside of normal society. I had always been rebellious in nature to authority, rules and a spoon-fed way of thinking. Coming from a very open-minded creative family, it was natural for me to connect to an unconventional way of being.

What made you decide now was the right time to exhibit these photos and materials?

It's been over two decades since some of these photographs were taken. I moved away from the scene after the tragic loss of my best friend, Ben, who died during a party in France. Followed by a string of other deaths, the scene started to have negative connotations for me. As much as I had loved being in that world, my life was ready for a different direction. I had kept a lot of the photographs in albums and

stored away the negatives safely. And for sentimental reasons, I couldn't bring myself to throw away the flyers. But I emotionally buried a lot of it and kept it in the past.

Enough time has passed now. I am making peace with that period of my life and embracing the positive sides of it. Now that I am so removed from it, I realise more and more what an unusual, relevant, innovative, special movement it was. And as there isn't a massive amount of documentation from that scene and those parties, I wanted to share my lived experience. Especially at this time when there is a lot of general interest and nostalgia for 90s culture and political issues challenging Europe and borders.

At those early parties, cameras were a bit frowned on. How and why did you find yourself documenting things?

I guess for me it was different, as I wasn't just a regular punter or raver. I was friends with the people who put on the parties and more immersed in the scene. I wasn't a photographer or journalist – I was part of this movement and these people were like family to me. I spent long periods of time travelling in friends' mobile homes in convoy with the sound systems across Europe. So really it was as acceptable as me taking photos of friends on a night out. At the time I felt if I didn't document, it would have been lost. It would have all been a hazy blur through the drugs and music.

Now that you've had some years to reflect, what is your most abiding memory of the spirit of these parties?

The first party was a small Spiral Tribe party in west London. I danced nonstop all night and probably interacted with everyone in the room. It felt like we were all united somehow. I remember with early parties especially there was such a good vibe and energy. It felt like we were part of something new, fresh and exciting. Obviously, with the illegal aspect, it meant it also attracted characters you wouldn't always want to mix with, so there was sometimes an edginess that came with that. Later, some of the London parties had quite a dark, postapocalyptic feel, but I kind of embraced that. The outdoor tek'nivals in Europe didn't feel that way. Something about being in the open air changed the energy. It was also more of a way of life in Europe – the parties sometimes lasted for five days. One particularly memorable party was Hostomice Teknival in Czech Republic, 1996. There were several sound systems there, including the Spirals. I felt on top of the world. I remember thinking, "This is what I have been waiting for. It's the one. This is what I live for."

In an era when many young people are turning to anti-establishment lifestyles, activism and protest, what lessons do you think people can learn from Spiral Tribe?

One of their well-known slogans being 'Make some fuckin' noise', I would say the message is: don't give up and speak your mind. It's important to question your beliefs, the system, the media, society and the way news is fed to you. They were about rejecting conventional life. **The scene did attract a lot of fast-living, hedonistic people, but there was also a sense of the idea of building a free, utopian community.** The parties and those involved were non-commercially driven. Which should be a positive influence to the current younger generations.

It was a world where Instagram and consumerist ideologies that dominate a lot of modern culture didn't exist. And I think all of us that remember that era look back with fondness. A lot of the parties' locations were shared simply through word of mouth and a secret party phone line. I think it's great that the current younger generations are becoming more and more politically engaged. It feels like a natural cycle that happens. After my generation, it felt for a while that there was a sense of apathy among youth and they seemed disengaged. So it's encouraging to see what is happening now with groups such as Extinction Rebellion.



## RUSSIA

Clayton Vomero's first documentary feature, *30HA* (Zona), is a compelling outsider portrait of modern Russia, told through two generations of disaffected youth. Seth Jacobson hears how warehouse parties and style mags collapsed into state repression and sinister spectacle



When Good Trouble meets up with filmmaker Clayton Vomero, it's in the pleasant surroundings of a pub garden on the edge of a sun-kissed park in east London. During the hours that pass, we perch and pint and snack, and discuss the end of ideology, 4D chess, "Oh denzian" and the machinations of Vladimir Putin's puppet master Vladislav Surkov. Set against the strains of easy-listening classics on the pub jukebox, and a backdrop of children playing and locals discussing football, the recordings of our conversations share some of the dreamy incongruity of Vomero's film *30HA*.

In this, his ambitious first documentary following 2015's acclaimed short *Gangne*, which *Dazed* described as having a "story like *Saturday Night Fever* for the Vogue-Tumblr generation", Vomero tells the story of outsider culture in modern Russia. The film's title, which translates as *Zona*, nods to a rich national tradition of dystopian literature – it is taken from *Roadside Picnic*, an influential Soviet sci-fi novel from 1971 about the aftermath of an alien landing, and refers to the tightly controlled areas that the extraterrestrial visited. Conceptually, it's no great leap to see modern Russia as such a zone.

Through a dual narrative delivered in interviews

with the first free generation of post-Soviet Russians and their modern counterparts, Vomero crafts a haunting elegy to doomed youth. For the class of 1991 – people such as the journalist and rave promoter Artemy Troitsky – an air of regret permeates their glamorous recollections of warehouse parties and semi-legal startup fashion magazines. "It looked like the people best equipped for the new times (were) us, the young people, who knew capitalist culture, who were dynamic and ready for cultural change," Troitsky says in the film – an optimism that proved misplaced. As Vomero notes: "There was a very short window of about two or three years where there was a moment of people being able to potentially build something, but the temptations of money and success were also great and so new that it was just two years that passed so quickly."

An aching sadness pervades the second half of the film, which addresses the current generation, the inheritors of the legacy of three decades of increasing repression and gangster capitalism. Cousins August, Nina and Dasha from Vladimir, an unremarkable town 190km from Moscow, live life through Instagram and dream of escape. An unnamed hustler

sells knockoff trainers through eBay, a risky pursuit. The rapper Husky, who was jailed in November 2018 after performing a gig on top of a car, dispenses bleak insights from the back seat of a scrapped car. "Our government does not know how to talk to people," he announces. "But at the same time, this is like the earth and the sky compared to what was happening 20 years ago. There was a complete anarchy back then. It was chaotic. I think Russia is at the crossroads right now. It's a question of time."

It's an unmistakably political film, and it's all the more powerful for not being a polemic. You can't watch it without taking a strong view on the political bankruptcy of Putin's prison state, but through its observational nature, Vomero flatters the viewer into coming to their own conclusions.

"It was cool to make something that I felt was abstractly political, because I felt that was in the language system that we used to deliver a lot of these ideas that are economic and political and so on," he says. "But then not necessarily discussing that outright. It was just giving the audience more credit to deduce that themselves. That was a bit of a risk in a way – even in making the film, some people were a bit uneasy with that narrative approach."

Russian audiences had the opportunity to judge the film for themselves when Vomero, a Brooklynite transplanted to Hackney, London, took it to the Beat Film Festival in Moscow last year. "It was a pretty humbling and amazing experience to take it there and have people receive it so well, and it wasn't just in the press but in the audiences too," he says. "Every screening that we did there was sold out, which was kind of a surprise. People were really interested in seeing it and discussing it at Q&As. They were hour-long affairs, proper interrogations, with people asking me why I did what I did, who was cast, what historical events were covered – so there was a lot to answer for!"

*30HA* also played to packed houses at Sheffield DocFest in England earlier that year. "People want to be able to fill things in themselves, to make things subjectively theirs, to be a part of what a piece of art is, and I've always been drawn to making films that have that structure inherently. This was an attempt to do this around a shared history that I felt I really had to go and answer for, rather than just put it out there."

So what did the audiences think? "Everyone's take on it unequivocally was that this was something that

was a conversation between two groups of people, happening in this weird head-fuck of a format!"

Despite what you might imagine about potentially subversive events in Russia, film festivals there aren't heavily policed affairs that are broken up by the state. "The Russian festivals are very well-organised," Vomero says. "They hold cinema in very high esteem. And it's to be expected because every conversation you have in Russia about culture is always so well informed, and people come with such reverence for the history of what has led to now."

But the lack of intervention shouldn't be read as a sign of any mellowing of the Russian state – more that it has made a virtue out of being unpredictable. "I think this the perfect tool of modern fascism, this randomness," Vomero says. "Who knows when or what will happen? And I think that's also the same in the US and in many places. It's the same here in the UK, with the way they are policing drill music. It's very cherry-picked. And I think a lot of people don't really take this seriously."

"When I was in Russia, the reporter from *Medica* (investigative journalist Ivan Golunov) had just been arrested, and so that was also on everyone's minds and there were a lot of protests about that." In a sense, big figurative spectacles such as Golunov's arrest on alleged drugs charges (he was subsequently released after a huge outcry) are used to enforce a sense of oppression that is as powerful as if they were cracking down on every festival anyway. "What was amazing," Vomero continues, "was that the protests that took place after his arrest led to every newspaper in Russia putting him on the front cover, which meant that the only person who could let him out was Putin, and then... well, who knows what was behind that?"

"It's all theatre. What is there to be trusted as to what the events actually are, and what they mean? Because I think that to a lot of people – maybe they feel they have Putin on his heels, and then they think: 'But doesn't he just want us to think that?'" Sitting thousands of miles away, looking out over the idyllic urban green stretched before us, it's hard to see the relevance to us, though as Vomero observes, "The current times, it's becoming clear, are the end of capitalism – more and more to the point where it can't continue."

What's next is up to us. [claytonvomero.com](http://claytonvomero.com)

# ZONED OUT

